

Dynamic Companions – a company focus



Our series of articles featuring InstMC Companion Companies continues as we go behind the scenes at The British Measurement and Testing Association ...

TEST LABS' CHAMPION

Measurement and testing laboratories often form a relatively small part of their companies' overall business structure and tend to be regarded as a cost on overheads. However, although these operations may not contribute directly to profits and rarely attract any accolades, their quiet pursuit of excellence is vitally important to the economy of their companies and to that of industry as a whole. If a laboratory were to produce poor quality or wrong measurement, the cost could be astronomical, causing serious damage to the business.

Co-ordinated 'voice'

There are many issues confronting measurement and testing laboratories and in order to champion their interests they need a powerful and co-ordinated 'voice' with which to address Government, UKAS and the European Laboratory Community. Under this mandate their own dedicated trade association – The British Measurement and Testing Association (BMTA) – was formed in 1990.

The Association is open to any company that carries out measurement or testing in virtually any field as part of its business operation. Approximately 100 members represent about 300 UKAS accredited laboratories and comprise individuals through to large companies employing 500-plus people, such as BAE Systems and Exova. Membership also includes the UK Accreditation Service (UKAS) and all the national measurement institutes i.e. LGC (formerly the Laboratory of the Government Chemist), the National Measurement Office (NMO formerly NWML), the National Physical Laboratory (NPL) and the National Engineering Laboratory (TUV NEL).

The BMTA has become a powerful ally in resolving issues affecting the measurement industry, both nationally and across Europe. For example, a close working relationship with UKAS has seen the accreditation authority generate significant improvements in its service to member laboratories. Similarly, the Association has worked alongside other organisations to secure an improved flow of knowledge from the academic world into the industrial arena. Previously, excellent research work being carried out, particularly by NPL, tended to reside in academia and was not easily transferable for industrial application. Today, thanks to the efforts of the BMTA and its allies, the output of research from the national measurement institutes is being transferred with an industry focus to afford a greater realisation of its business potential.



EMC testing of mobile phones. (Photo courtesy of TÜV Products Service Ltd)

Successful lobbying

Last year the Association added muscle to a successful lobbying campaign to minimise cuts in government funding of the NMO and National Measurement System. Ministers were informed that, should the National Measurement System suffer from lack of funding, its ability to develop technologies and new methods of measurement would be seriously reduced. This would then impinge on the ability of members to develop their businesses into new fields and to raise standards. Ultimately, cuts were less severe than previously envisaged and the budgetary cuts to the NMO and National Measurement System maintained the level of flat funding.

As well as pursuing its members' interests at national level, the BMTA is also well-placed to influence relevant opinion-forming bodies within the EU legislature, being one of the 25 'active members' of EUROLAB (European Federation of National Associations of Measurement, Testing and Analytical Laboratories) which fosters the common interests of laboratories throughout Europe. Most EU countries have their own 'Eurolab' and the UK is represented by the BMTA in its role of Eurolab UK Ltd. The Association is also represented on EUROLAB's General Assembly and on its Technical Committee for Quality Assurance (TCQA).

Recently, the Association added weight to EUROLAB's successful negotiations with the European accreditation body (EA) and the European Commission regarding new regulations involving a ban on cross-border accreditations. This posed a serious problem, particularly for multi-national companies with laboratories in several European countries. Accreditations from each of those countries would be required whereas, previously, a single internationally recognised certification from their country of origin, e.g. UKAS for UK enterprises, would have been sufficient. EUROLAB's landmark success was to secure a more realistic interpretation of the regulation, thus saving multi-national companies the high cost of multiple accreditations. Now, provided multi-national companies can demonstrate that their overseas laboratories operate under the same quality management system as that of the parent company, with a clear management chain of responsibility back to the head office, their cross-border business would only require accreditation from the country where the head office is located.

Effective conduit

As well as providing national and international platforms from which to champion its industry, the BMTA is also an effective conduit for the spread of knowledge. The Association is represented on 40 BSI committees from which papers are circulated to members; trials for interlaboratory test comparisons are arranged, as are conferences and work shops covering developments of importance to the industry.

The BMTA is acknowledged as being an effective and resolute trade association and will continue to build on its credentials to create greater awareness throughout the political and business communities of its industry's importance to the national economy.

For more information please visit www.bmta.co.uk

Bryan Richardson
InstMC Consultant