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Next generation IT infrastructures

WHY USE AN “APPROVED INFRASTRUCTURE INSTALLER”?

by
**Mike Gilmore, Technical Director of the FIA
for Networking+ (April 2006)**

How do you differentiate between suppliers of services? How do you know, in advance, whether a particular supplier is going to provide you with a better service than another? Obviously one of the best way is to base your judgement on experience - either your own or that of someone else that you trust. When it comes to the installation of cabling infrastructures that is not always possible. Unless you have an incumbent “small works” installer, you may only require the services of an installer once every three to five years. Three years is a long time In the installation business - staff may have changed, standards may have been revised - and past experience cannot always be relied upon. Even if you do have an incumbent installer, they may not be capable of taking on complete installations or refurbishment projects so you have to look elsewhere.

The options for the selection of installers for larger telecommunications cabling infrastructures are limited. If you want a “manufacturers warranty” for the finished job, the supplier may require that you select one of their “approved” installers. These days a “supplier approval” is awarded based upon a commercial performance (i.e. the volume of business delivered to the supplier by that installer) mixed with a requirement for product training. The examination of “reference” sites is frequently waived due to the contractual difficulties it creates. Nevertheless, no supplier wants to work with installers that cause problems so this system is, to some extent, self-regulating.

But are problems always a bad thing? It rather depends who is on the receiving end of the problem - installers who cause “problems” by standing up for their customers in the face of poor supplier service may actually be just what the end-user actually needs.

That brings us on to the purpose of this article. What is it that we really want from infrastructure installers? Could it be that most elusive and difficult to define characteristic “high quality”. I would suggest not! If we cannot define what we mean by “high quality” we should not rely on it too much. Perhaps we should consider “competence” as a benchmark. I am not so sure - primarily because competence is a personal thing. I know plenty of competent people who can do their jobs very well indeed but they work for organisations that use them incorrectly and render them incompetent as a result. The employment of competent people may not be the key criterion we might imagine.

The FIA Council have pondered the matter of “approved installers” for a long time and we have grown to believe that what most customers desire is installers that minimise “risk”. The reduction of risk takes many forms but one thing is certain - if the installers minimise the levels of risk to themselves then they also minimise the risk to their customers.

“Reduction of risk” simultaneously encompasses all the concepts detailed above - for suppliers, those installers that minimise risk will be more soundly-based from a commercial viewpoint, they will ask the pertinent questions of their suppliers in order to use their products correctly. These installers will employ competent persons in a professional manner - emphasising rather than undermining their competence. An installer committed to the “reduction of risk” will be very careful not to over-commit and will have a good understanding of the requirements of the various standards he is asked to work to.

Do such paragons of virtue exist? Well yes they do - there actually are quite a few of them. They do not always get the recognition they deserve because they are frequently not the biggest players and they are not always the lowest bidders for tenders - because they seek to manage risk - although they may be the lowest cost option at the end of the day. However, that is going to change. The new FIA Approved Installers Scheme, being launched in May 2006, is targeted to provide “managed risk” installers with the recognition due to them.

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Two seminars, one in London (June 28th) and the other in Leeds (June 29th) will introduce the scheme to FIA members, their suppliers and customers alike. The FIA will provide enrolled Approved Installers with a series of quality assurance software tools to improve their risk management and will monitor progress using those tools. It is hoped that the existing FIA Approved Installers including Line Management Group, Lynx Networks, Serco Rakmulti and WG & R will merge seamlessly into the new scheme. The tools provided to the Approved Installers will apply to balanced (twisted pair) cabling as well as to optical fibre so FIA Approved Installers will be able to carry their commitments to risk reduction into the copper domain.

In order to provide further support to customers that use the services of FIA Approved Installers, the existing Arbitration Schemes are being enhanced to reflect the modified risk that customers are expected to face.

If you wish to attend the FIA AIS Launch seminars or simply wish to access the resources provided by the FIA go to www.fia-online.co.uk. Enquiries can be e-mailed to jane@fiasec.demon.co.uk or, alternatively, you can contact the FIA Secretariat in 01763 273039.

Biography

As the Technical and Standards Director of the UK Fibreoptic Industry Association, Mike is heavily involved in the development of training and competence standards for the fibre installation industry and sets down policy in this area. In addition he chairs the audit and arbitration committees for the FIA. His book "Fibre optic cabling; theory design and installation practice" published in 1991 remains a reference for both experts and entrants into this field.

In the UK, Mike is Chairman of TCT/7, the BSI technical committee responsible for the three panels on telecommunication cabling. He also chairs two of these panels (TCT7/-/1 and TCT7/-/3). TCT7/-/1 acts to assist development of European and international standards for telecommunications cabling. TCT7/-/3 manages the implementation of European standards and others in the UK.

At the European level Mike is Convenor of CENELEC TC215 Working Group 1, the group that controls the development of European standards for the design and installation of telecommunications cabling. In the international arena Mike is Convenor of ISO/IEC JTC1 SC25 WG3 IPTG, a standards committee working on generic cabling for industrial premises (ISO/IEC 24702). More recently Mike has been appointed as Convenor of the ISO/IEC JTC1 SC25 WG3 Cabling Implementation Task Group.

Mike is a regular speaker at seminars and conferences in all five continents. He has provided the keynote address and opening presentation in many conferences in the UK, Germany and the Netherlands. His seminars, providing regular updates on the progression of cabling standards are particularly well attended and are operating in the UK and continental Europe.



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