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Standards: A gateway for SMEs to the Single Market

INTERVIEW TO

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Maitane Olabarria is the Director of SBS (Small Business Standards), the organization representing and defending Small and Medium-sized Enterprises' (SMEs) interests in the standardization process at European and international levels. CEN and CENELEC sat down with her to discuss the role of SMEs in standardization and the importance of standards for the Single Market.

1 Could you describe in short what SBS is and how it engages in European and international Standardization?

Small Business Standards (SBS) is a European non-profit association established to represent the interests of Small and Medium-Sized enterprises (SMEs) in standardization. We work with the three European Standardization Organisations (ESOs) - CEN, CENELEC and ETSI - and with ISO and IEC at the international level to ensure that small businesses in Europe are properly represented in the standards-making process.

One of the main ways of doing this is by appointing SME experts to relevant technical committees and working groups at the European and international level. Currently we have 65 experts working in more than 70 technical committees. This increases the influence of SMEs in standardization. SBS is also involved in the management bodies of the three ESOs. A big part of our activities is also dedicated to raising awareness about standardization among SMEs and SME associations to motivate them to get involved.

2 How do standards bring value to the Single Market? And how much do SMEs benefit from them?

I think it is fair to say that without European standards there would not be a Single Market. It is thanks to the New Approach and harmonised standards that companies can sell their products across European countries without the need for costly adaptations. Standardization offers considerable benefits to all, and in particular to SMEs. Contrary to larger companies, SMEs have more limited financial and other resources to show the conformity and performance of their products and gain the trust of the market. Standards can help them to comply with legal requirements, reduce costs, allow them to demonstrate the quality of their products and open-up markets. To achieve these benefits, however, standards must meet SME needs.

3 In your experience, are SMEs aware of the benefits of standards? What actions are taken to address this?

The situation varies significantly from a company or a sector to another, but in general, SMEs are less likely than larger companies to get involved in standardization. This is often due to a lack of resources, but also to a lack of awareness about the importance of standards for their trade and daily activities.

At SBS, we try to increase this awareness in various ways. One of them is the organisation of national seminars in cooperation with the national SME association and the National Standards Body/National Committees. We also try to attend as many events of relevance to SMEs as possible and try to develop guidance materials on different subjects to encourage the uptake of standards by SMEs. Finally, we use our website - www.sbs-sme.eu -, newsletters and social media to disseminate information and make standardization more widely known among SMEs and SME associations.

4 Do you perceive a difference in the European Standardization system's (ESS) approach towards SMEs, as compared to other areas of the world?

In Europe, we have Regulation 1025/2015 on European standardization, which promotes the effective participation of SMEs and other societal stakeholders in the ESS. SBS has been recognised as the organisation representing SMEs in standardization under this Regulation. As a result, we have a special partnership with the European Standardization Organisations, which facilitates the access and participation of SMEs in the European standards-making process. This is unique! In 2018, SBS organised a conference, where among other issues, we discussed the involvement of SMEs in standardization in different countries around the world. Indeed, there does not seem to be similar incentive measures for SMEs in other parts of the world.

Moreover, the special relationship we enjoy in Europe does not exist at the international level with ISO and IEC, and the participation of SMEs in international standardization is more difficult than at national or European level. One of the objectives of SBS is to increase our cooperation with ISO and IEC in view of facilitating the further involvement of SMEs in the development of international standards.

5 **What are the main issues for SMEs? And how can standards help to address them? On this regard, SBS is developing a new compatibility test, to assess the relevance of a standard to SMEs. Can you please explain what it consists of?**

There are different aspects that need to be considered when writing standards to ensure they meet SME needs. These include keeping the standards as clear and short as possible, including practical guidance and examples, considering costs of implementation, testing and conformity assessment or limiting cross-referencing to other standards. Guide 17, published by CEN and CENELEC in 2010 and developed with the inputs of SME representatives, provides a good summary of the issues that may be of importance to SMEs.

SBS is indeed developing an SME compatibility test for standards. The aim is to make it available in the second half of 2020. This assessment builds on CEN-CENELEC Guide 17 and is designed to provide an overall perception of the SME compatibility of any standard. The test includes a series of criteria, 11 so far, that would allow standards into three main categories: good standards - those requiring little or no change - average standards - those which would benefit from change, - and poor standards - those causing substantial challenges for SMEs and which require urgent improvement. For us, this tool is an important starting point for possible improvements to a standard for the benefit of SMEs, but also of all standards users. After all, if a standard is SME-compatible, it will also be user-compatible in general.

6 **AI is one of the most promising and interesting developments for businesses, big and small. What are the main challenges and benefits for SMEs in the fields? And what is the place for standards?**

Artificial Intelligence can bring many benefits to many sectors, from condition monitoring, predictive maintenance and process optimisation in manufacturing, to improved diagnosis in healthcare or personalised goods and services. These benefits are valid for both larger and smaller companies.

Regarding the challenges for SMEs, one of the main ones is access to data, which is essential for the further development of AI. SMEs do not have the same capacity than large corporations to attract and hire engineers and data professionals to be able to integrate and fully benefit from these technologies. Standardization through interoperability, APIs, and metadata could help remove barriers in the market. Standards have an important role to play in the uptake of AI: nevertheless, we should be careful to strike the right balance between regulation, standards and innovation, especially when countries around the world are already heavily investing in the race to lead these technologies.

7 **You have a long and thorough experience in the world of standardization. Have you seen any changes over the years in the ESS and in the evolution of standards?**

I would say that one of the main changes in the last fifteen years has been the convergence of technologies and sectors. This influences standardization by increasing the need for cooperation between experts from different backgrounds, technical committees and standardization organisations to avoid overlaps and the proliferation of different standards.

Another important change is the increasing number of standards developed at the international level. Some sectors are international by nature and having common European and international standards can help to access new markets and support the global competitiveness of European businesses. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, this also brings an additional challenge for SMEs, since they have more difficulties to be present at the table in international meetings.

8 **How do you see the evolution of the European Standardization System in the coming years? What aspect should it focus on?**

We need to focus on reviving the New Approach or New Legislative Framework (NLF). The timely citation of harmonised standards in the Official Journal is essential for businesses, and more specifically SMEs. To be able to keep their competitiveness and scale-up, SMEs need up-to-date standards that allow them to benefit from the presumption of conformity with EU legal requirements. This is essential if we want to have a functioning Single Market!

9 **What did the COVID-19 crisis mean for European SMEs? What step should we take, as a system, to ensure resilience?**

The crisis has heavily affected a large part of SMEs across Europe, but many of them have also played a crucial role in combating COVID-19. To this respect, I have to say that SBS welcomed the decision of CEN, CENELEC, ISO and IEC to provide free access to standards on medical devices and personal protective equipment relevant to the fight against COVID-19. This initiative helped SMEs to convert their manufacturing installations to meet the growing demand for these products.

I think it is important we now focus on the Recovery Plan. In this context, we must work together on a standardization strategy that fully considers the needs of SMEs and strengthens the Single Market and the system for the development, assessment and citation of harmonised standards.