

CE la vie: a mutual attraction

by Michael Mainelli

Britain and the EU have developed an expensive hobby: checking whether somebody else has checked something. Since Brexit, the EU and UK have been threatening to double up on accreditation and certification. Picture a manufacturer confronting two certification processes for one product. The appliance may have an energy-saving setting; the paperwork will not. A mutual recognition agreement (MRA) on conformity assessment could help stop the administrative spin cycle. Less *déjà vu*, more revenue.

Reciprocal recognition

The principle is straightforward: assessment bodies on either side should be able to check products against the other market's requirements. Great Britain continues to recognise CE marking across virtually all product categories. We can negotiate the same for UK testing, inspection and certification body work to be recognised in Europe. This does not abolish safety rules, merge regulations or wave every product through customs. The prize is reciprocal recognition and durable certainty, not a bonfire of standards.

Avoidable friction

"Very nice," a London Chamber of Commerce and Industry member might say, "but I sell advice, not appliances." Every factory has a supporting cast of bankers, insurers, accountants, lawyers, software providers and logistics specialists. When certification delays a shipment, then payments can slip, working capital stays tied up, and somebody must control worsening cashflow.

Reducing avoidable friction helps trade through clearer delivery schedules for lenders, fewer compliance uncertainties for advisers, and more predictable investment decisions for clients. Testing, inspection and certification are themselves services. A mutual recognition agreement could open opportunities for UK assessment bodies to serve EU manufacturers, expanding choice and capacity. London sells confidence as well as capital; trustworthy checking is part of that business, even when nobody wears a pinstripe laboratory coat.

Tomorrow's agenda

Professional and financial services should champion this MRA, not watch from the sidelines. This is enlightened self-interest: help clients cut friction now, and press for mutual recognition of your own qualifications and regulated services next. A successful agreement on products could build the trust and negotiating momentum needed for that wider ambition. It would not itself restore passporting or secure recognition of professional qualifications; those require separate agreements. But that is a reason to build on this initiative, not sit it out. Back recognition for the factory today to put services firms firmly on tomorrow's agenda.

Call to action

There is an initiative worth backing. I chair the UK Accreditation Service. In October we published *Call to action: Developing a framework for an EU-UK mutual recognition agreement on conformity assessment* that brings together supportive voices including BusinessEurope, Orgalim, SMEunited, Make UK and sector associations. The call is for:

- streamlining market access by eliminating the prospect of duplicative conformity assessments;
- providing long-term stability and predictability for manufacturers, building business confidence;
- granting EU industry access to the UK's conformity assessment market, boosting competition, resource availability and supply chain resilience.

Matt Gantley, chief executive, UKAS commented: "This is shared commercial housekeeping, not an invitation to reopen every argument since the invention of the Channel."

Evidence

What can LCCI members do? First, send the Chamber evidence: extra assessment fees, waiting times, lost orders and financing costs, distinguishing actual duplication from feared future requirements. Ask clients and suppliers too. A banker's customer may have the best case study; an accountant may already be able to vouch for the unpleasant arithmetic.

Second, press MPs, trade associations and European business counterparts for a reciprocal, workable framework. Joint requests travel better than solo complaints. Third, check assessment providers' accreditation, relevant scope and regulatory designation: accreditation is not automatically permission to certify for every market.

Let's make this a Chamber conversation across manufacturing, finance and services. Mutual recognition starts with recognising mutual interests. UK businesses compete best on ingenuity, quality and service, not on who can afford the most impressive collection of duplicate certificates.

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