

IEC NC Japan

Taking stock – one year at the IEC

Alt: Back to the future – one year at the IEC

Interview with Philippe Metzger
IEC General Secretary & CEO



We asked Philippe Metzger how he experienced his first year at the IEC, what plans he has going forward and discussed a series of questions that are of special interest to JISC and our readers.

JISC: The IEC has launched a governance review and started the development of a new strategic plan. What will be your priorities in the next two years?

Philippe Metzger: First, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to share my impressions and thoughts. Japan has been a founding member of the IEC and continues to participate effectively and actively in the IEC. I look forward to regular face-to-face meetings very soon.

For 2021, I am very hopeful that we will be able to hold the IEC General Meeting in Dubai. I believe it is important for the IEC community to reconnect and meet physically. Of course, anybody who would not be able to travel by October may connect virtually, and we will do everything we can to make it a worthwhile networking opportunity for everyone.

I also hope that the IEC membership will accept the new IEC governance at the General Meeting. Updating the IEC Statutes and Rules of Procedure has been a major undertaking in 2020 and 2021. In early 2020, we put in place the IEC governance review task force (IGTF) with eminent members under the leadership of our President Dr Yinbiao Shu and supported by Central Office and KPMG. Over the past 18 months, the IGTF worked very hard on improving our governance to more closely match members' needs and requirements of the future. The proposal has received extensive feedback by IEC Members and will be sent to the IEC Council for consideration and decision at the end of July.

Personally, I believe it is important for the IEC to update its governance system. This will allow the IEC to provide members with access to accurate, timely data and information; greater transparency on who makes decisions, and a clearer view on accountability and interaction between governing bodies, advisory bodies, and NCs.

The new governance will increase efficiency through a more effective and coordinated decision making process; a performance-oriented culture, and by providing a more streamlined and integrated structure of advisory bodies. It is also an opportunity for the organization to become more diverse and inclusive and to expand the number of skilled and motivated people participating in the IEC.

If, which I hope, the new Statutes and Rules of Procedure are accepted by the IEC Members, we have our work cut out for 2022 and possibly also 2023. Implementation would start as of 1 January 2022.

Equally important, as we are approaching the third year of the implementation of the current IEC Masterplan, we have started the development of the future IEC Strategy. The Strategic Plan Task Force (SPTF) under the leadership of our Treasurer Jo Cops is aiming at a strategy that looks at the shorter- and longer-term outlook for IEC. One that can constantly evolve to fit our needs for many years to come. This is of crucial importance to ensure the future relevance of the IEC. The task force has the ambitious goal of finalizing the new strategy by end 2021 and it is of course consulting and involving all the IEC Members and leading entities on the way.

Finally, going forward, the IEC will be a key actor in global governance if it manages to leverage the unique know-how of its thousands of experts for all stakeholders, both within and outside our organization. We are living in a multi-stakeholder environment and catering for the needs of the digital economy and society at large is of the essence more than ever.

In sum: my focus over the next couple of years will be to help put in place a new governance, strategy and all necessary tools to allow the IEC to enter the digital age and kick-start the fundamental and transformational change that will be at the core of our future as an organization.

JISC: In view of increasingly large standards projects, for example for smart cities, collaboration between IEC, ISO and ITU seems to be more important than ever. How will you tackle this issue and make effective use of WSC and SPCG activities?

PME: As you rightfully point out, broad solutions for increasingly complex systems, such as smart cities require the collaboration between many companies and organizations, who may otherwise be fiercely competitive. The speed of innovation has accelerated to a point where none of us can do everything alone anymore.

The collaboration between IEC and ISO has been effective for a very long time given that we have in common many members and most of our Directives. Also, with the institutionalization of regular joint meetings of the Presidents of both organizations and the official Statement of Collaboration, it is fair to say that the ties between the two organizations are stronger than ever. We are also preparing and aligning very closely when it comes to international cooperation, in many leading fora or organizations such as the G20, COP 26 or OECD. Whenever it makes sense for the two organizations and our members, we cooperate on concrete projects.

The most recent and potentially most transformational example is the exploration and future positioning of both organisations with regard to machine-readable and machine-interpretable standards, also referred to as SMART Standards, which open a new era in digitalization. For a joint venture of such dimensions to succeed, it is key that both organizations can deal with each other on a level playing field, by putting in place the appropriate internal structures and processes on each side. This will ultimately empower both organizations to deal with the challenges and opportunities at stake in an informed, transparent and collaborative way. The IEC Council Board has therefore decided to set up an IEC Task Force that can help steer this process.

The IEC, ISO and ITU also closely cooperate in the context of the Strategic Programme Coordination Group (SPCG) to avoid contradictions in standards and ensure compatibility between different standards whenever possible, including in new technology areas. Furthermore, we have put in place cross-cutting joint initiatives such as the World Standards Cooperation (WSC), the Climate Change Coordinating Committee (CCCC), or the Smart City Strategic Task Force, to name just a few.

JISC: What will be the “new normal” after the COVID-19 pandemic? Will IEC meetings be held face-to-face again and when they are virtual, how will you consider the working hours of experts from different regions of the world?

PME: I expect that many changes that have come our way during the pandemic will remain. I see us adopt a mixed form of work, with hybrid, virtual and face-to-face encounters existing side-by-side in our standardization and conformity assessment work. The General Meeting in Dubai with full remote participation possibilities is a point in case.

Clearly, we will again travel for business, especially in 2022 to catch up with the lack of personal encounters since the global pandemic broke.

While COVID-19 had a huge impact on the world economy, most experts were able to cope quite well with the pandemic as far as core work processes are concerned. However, all broadly agreed that in the long run, working online lacks dimensions which are important for consensus building and innovative collaboration and that it can put a heavy burden on the individuals attending virtual meetings from different time zones. Going forward, and as soon as the sanitary situation permits, we will encourage people to get together again. In some cases, distancing and other precautions will have to be taken. However, experience has shown that some meetings can be very efficiently conducted online.

With regard to virtual meetings, for the sake of flexibility and efficiency the IEC is leaving the decision regarding time zones up to the meeting organizers and participants, and not impose top-down rules.

JISC: How do you see the further development of the collaboration between IEC and ISO in terms of IT and especially in view of the needs of JTC1?

PME: The cooperation between IEC and ISO is closer than ever at all levels. In IT, we are leveraging each other's tools and processes to the utmost extent, whenever it makes sense for the members and experts of both organizations. The heads of both IT departments meet regularly to identify joint projects that create synergies and we have made mutual use of technologies available in one or the other organisation in a number of cases, most recently for instance as regards a new business intelligence tool for our Members.

JISC: Thank you for this interview Philippe Metzger.

PME: You are very welcome, my pleasure.

Box:

A lawyer by training, Philippe Metzger became IEC General Secretary & CEO on 1 February 2020, shortly before the global pandemic hit. He joined the IEC following 6 years at the helm of the Swiss Federal Office of Communications OFCOM, having previously also held senior positions at the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), and having served as Senior Corporate Counsel of a US multinational IT corporation with EU headquarters in Amsterdam.