

# **THE ACADEMY OF ELECTRICAL CONTRACTING**

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**ELECTRICAL CONTRACTING:  
NECA AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

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Academy Chairman, Bob Doran III, NECA President, Rod Borden, Fellows of the Academy, partners and staff, let me start with an Australian traditional greeting and say "G'Day" to you all.

## **ELECTRICAL CONTRACTING NECA AND INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS**

When Bob Doran contacted me several months ago and in subsequent discussions with Academy Secretary, Russell Alessi, it was suggested that I submit some comments on international relationships and the NECA contractor. This, of course, given the rate at which change happens and its consequential effect on the whole electrical industry internationally, opens up an enormous field of items for discussion. Giving some thought to the paper I came up with the title "Electrical Contracting, NECA and International Relationships or Aspects."

I intend to start with some basic thoughts and background of our industry, embrace some aspects of membership of NECA and conclude with a few views on the international scene building in part on universality.

### **ELECTRICITY**

To start at the beginning, *electricity is a universal product*. There is almost nothing that happens that does not involve electricity, electrical impulses and the many other forms in which it may be used.

Just stop for a minute and reflect how basic it is to our very existence, for each of us think, move and live by series of electrical pulses within our own body. But let's leave those basics to the neurosurgeons and look at the areas where we work and we recognise that it is similar — that data, computers and communication sectors of our industry use series of electrical impulses to achieve the desired effect in each of their avenues of operation — and then we get closer to the general work of our industry. We once again see that there is very little that happens that does not use electricity to advantage: lighting, heating, motive power, mechanical actions, fluid and flow control, temperature and comfort control, automated operations that make life easy, that ensure conformity to preset standards and devices that ensure safety in all aspects of life.

### **ELECTRICAL CONTRACTING**

By its very nature electrical contracting is a universal industry.

Generally our industry is classified as part of the

construction industry for it plays a very important part in the construction area on the one hand providing services to enable the wide range of automated construction equipment to operate and on the other actually carrying out the installation of electrical wiring and connection of the lighting, power outlets and fixed equipment. Our industry classification is not solely restricted to the construction industry but rather is an exclusive industry in itself. It serves all other industries, all sectors of commerce and all nature of accommodation, dwellings and entertainment.

It depends on few other industries to enable it to operate.

It is the innovation of electrical contractors that maximises the convenience of the use of the product we work with. It is the expertise of the electrical contractor that ensures the product is handled efficiently at installation level with appropriate cabling accessories and consumer friendly fittings, and it is the experience of the electrical contractor that foresees the need for control and protective devices to maintain the integrity of safety to the consumer.

We are an important industry on a universal basis in each of the locations and communities where we live and work.

### **THE ELECTRICAL CONTRACTOR**

To become an electrical contractor it is necessary to acquire specific skills firstly as an electrical mechanic or wireman. This generally is done by entering into a period of structured training, developing skills in core subjects that enable the trainee or apprentice to gain an understanding of (a) handling the product, (b) recognising best means of ensuring the effective use of the product, (c) safety measures necessary to avoid accidents to the tradespeople working with the product and (d) safety measures to protect the general public as the end user of electricity from personal or material damage as mentioned earlier.

The diverse range of technical aspects and theories to be learnt calls for a significant period of training four years in Australia, five years in America and so the person aspiring to eventually become an electrical contractor needs to be determined to succeed by study off the job to relate to hands on procedures on the job.

Having completed that training it necessarily follows that to commence business as an individual, a partner or a corporate entity there must be an inclination towards entrepreneurial attitudes — for why else would you leave the relative comfort and security of an 8-hour-a-day involvement to produce income and why

else would one risk all one had monetarily to go out there in the wilderness of business? And you know this is just the way most of us and our forebears have commenced in business, not necessarily with full regard for the risks involved but with a high measure of confidence that we **will** succeed. That very factor of an entrepreneurial attitude is perhaps one of the attributes that makes electrical contracting one of the more exclusive industries that it is. That determination once again will play a large part in the success or otherwise of the electrical contractor, which is usually decided in the first two years of business. Make it to the two year mark and the rate of success from then on is generally considered, but not necessarily guaranteed, to be better.

Now most electrical contractors fairly soon get to realize that you cannot operate in isolation. There are lots of communications and liaison to be effected along the way to achieve success — success with clients, consultants, suppliers, statutory bodies, financial advisors, employment and IR requirements, regulatory bodies, tax offices and, of course, on a not irregular basis with ones own fellow electrical contractors moving along the paths of business alongside you.

How can one cope with all those requirements you meet on a regular basis?

So now the electrical contractor having developed the hands-on skills to enable him to carry out the manual tasks of business finds there is so much more to learn to survive and then comes to the realization that there are only so many hours in the day. How — but how — can you keep up with it all? Well I guess that brings us to the next step along the way to success.

## NECA

Whilst trade associations were most likely formed in earlier times for perhaps social reasons such as discussions of trade interest, they have since become much more than that. In our present times with the speed of change, the enormity of requirements incumbent upon the business person to be conversant with, membership in a trade association has become a vital part in the successful operation of most businesses. Enter NECA. Here we are possibly talking to the converted, but let us reflect on what at least in part NECA does and how it supports the business of electrical contracting.

If you just read through the introduction pages of the NECA book you will realize the wealth of knowledge available, the vast array of service for support and the immeasurable bank of experience — all of which can be yours as a regular member.

Of course, it is here that we see a connection for the

electrical contractor with the universality of knowledge and experience. We see NECA gathering its information from all points of the compass and every corner of the territory from which it derives its membership and then disseminating that knowledge and experience gained to the membership as a whole on a universal basis. The mode and ambit of its operation ensures that most aspects of each subject get the consideration required to provide realistic guidance to its membership at individual level.

NECA enables the views of the electrical contractor to be heard and recognized — something otherwise almost impossible for the individual contractor given the time, experience and expertise required to present a sound case. In statutory matters, regulations, wiring rules and employment matters, the influence of NECA moderates the requirements in a realistic way to enable their compliance by the average electrical contractor without that contractor being required to “go over the top.”

So too does NECA enable the contractor and supplier to compare notes on the latest technology by its annual trade show and by the endorsement and enablement of the many seminars and mini shows held each year in a diversity of locations.

Then at local level NECA membership enables individual chapters to coordinate the efforts and representations of its members for the common good and moderation of what otherwise may be unfair and overbearing demands at that local level.

National or local, we are all aware of these benefits made available by NECA.

## INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS

In considering international aspects we should pause for a moment and consider where we are, and from where we have come — in business operational ways — that is. During my involvement in the electrical contracting field — say, from the 40s to the 60s — many things moved at a snails pace compared to what they do now. Let's look at a few.

**Mail:** To send correspondence between countries of the different continents, say Australia to America, one could allow up to six or eight weeks — one way for most mail if not all, travelled by surface.

**Telephone:** If you wanted to speak to your counterpart in another distant country you called your local — manual — exchange and booked a time for the call, which in busy periods may be several days away.

Even in the city of Melbourne, Australia, in the 1950s and 60s we still had a manual exchange for a

greater part of the Central Business District. One would dial (on a decadic system) Central, which was "0", and ask for the four digit number which would be manually connected by an operator.

**Travel:** Melbourne to Europe or Britain six to eight weeks, Australia to the U.S.A about four to six weeks – why even Melbourne to Sydney was two days by boat, one day by car or train.

Sometimes it is hard to realize that was the pace we all knew and accepted.

Now, mail is surface air-lifted in three to four days, express air, one day – but if you use a fax, it's instantaneous. Pick up the telephone handpiece and dial – instantaneous connection. You can travel from Melbourne to Europe or Britain in up to 24 hours by air, depending where you are travelling. Australia to America takes only 14 to 18 hours, depending on location.

On top of all that you have to consider the trading, communication and information facilities such as email and the Internet – the world wide web is available 24 hours a day – globally.

It stands to reason therefore that with such instant ability to communicate, exchange information and trade internationally we need to take on board the increasing importance of international relationships between the nations of the world and what can be achieved.

There are several aspects that are worthy of mention.

## **EXCHANGE OF INDUSTRY INFORMATION**

In particular, the exchange of industry information between Australia and the United States. In 1986 a decision was made in Australia to hold our Annual National Conference alongside the NECA Convention at San Francisco. In all, more than 120 Australians travelled to California and experienced the trade show at the Moscone Centre and attended various seminars and social events that accompanied the convention activities. For the part of the Australians, it was an outstanding success which still rates a mention 12 years on. It was an eye opener to most of us that attended. It was there that the first formal communications were initiated between our two countries. Emerson Hamilton, the President at that time, John Grau, Executive Director, and Bill Bretz of the Los Angeles County Chapter were all key participants for NECA U.S.A. It goes without saying that relationships begun at that time were a key to many events that have followed. Electrical Contractors Federation, Victoria

(now NECA Australia – Victoria Chapter) have been engaged in two study tours and was the second international chapter to become a member of NECA U.S.A. There have been numerous visits by Australian electrical contractors to conventions and with their counterparts in the U.S.A. with resultant development of good fraternal relationships.

In 1991 negotiations began between Australia and U.S.A. to organize an exchange of apprentices in training with the Omaha, NE Chapter. In this case an apprentice from Melbourne exchanged employers with one in Omaha for a period of three months. This was achieved with liaison with immigration authorities, training bodies, Electrical Trades Union Australia and IBEW U.S.A. (our two trade associations), and the sponsoring parties, which were the Lions Club City of Melbourne (Host) in Australia and Omaha Sunrise Lions Club, Omaha, Nebraska. Much was achieved in personal relationships – not only for the two apprentices, for whom we arranged to have time together in each other's country, but also between employers, trade association members and, by no means least, the two representatives of the Lions Clubs. I should say here that a great deal of the success at Omaha was attributed to Omaha Chapter Manager Bob Howard, CAE, who officially retires today.

The apprentices each experienced wiring installation materials, procedures and techniques not previously encountered, and each has personally conveyed to me that it was an experience of a lifetime not to be forgotten and which they believe should be repeated for the mutual benefit and understanding of others.

The programme was repeated several times, once more with Omaha, one apprentice with the Everett (WA) Chapter, and one with the West Virginia-Ohio Valley Chapter, in each case exchanging with apprentices in Melbourne Australia. Unfortunately there was a hiccup with the immigration authorities over some requirements that were unable to be resolved at the time which has at present suspended activity in that regard; however, the programme proved its worth in terms of international understanding – which incidentally is the first object of Lions International.

## **THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE ON A LARGER SCALE**

Several years ago and possibly with the increase of applicants as International Chapters of NECA U.S.A., meetings of international visitors were initiated at the Annual Convention and Trade Show. These have proved most interesting and also enlightening, for

those participating have found that they encounter much of the same business experiences as their counterparts in other lands.

Further to that, the IFEC (International Forum of Electrical Contractors) held in September 1997 its inaugural meeting, choosing Edinburgh Scotland as its venue. This was attended by members of the Association of International Electrical Contracting (AIE) whose Past President, Bjorn Petterson, took an initiating role, NECA U.S.A., NECA Australia and Asian Association representatives. At this initial meeting of the IFEC, objectives were formulated to promote general interest in electrical installation, exchange ideas and encourage personal contacts on a national association basis as well as between regional associations and individual member businesses.

Each of the participating bodies are, one can be sure, examining the next step to take and the ultimate value in participation.

America and Australia are both undoubtedly at the forefront in leading edge technology and will have much to contribute and each with a region to represent. NECA U.S.A. has the ability to adequately represent North America – embracing the United States, Canada and Mexico.

NECA Australia, while yet to define its role, is centrally situated globally between U.S.A. and Europe, is located in the Southern Hemisphere which provides an advantage for IFEC for representation south of the equator, already has interchange of information and regular contact with ECA New Zealand, is in time of day sequence near to that of Asian countries and thus has the potential to become the focal point for communication and dissemination of information from IFEC to FAPECA and to the other associations in the Asia/Pacific region.

It possibly would not be appropriate for Australia to have responsibility for the Associations but rather to be the communication medium because each, particularly in the Asian region, has its own language, its own culture and set of values in its own area of operation.

Australia, however, as an English speaking country promises an effective base for communication and shares the common language asset with both NECA U.S.A. and IFEC whose members mostly have an understanding of English.

Well where does that leave all of us – the individual electrical contractor, the Academy member? Can we be involved?

Yes, we can be involved just by having input at our own level in individual chapters and where involved again at the national level.

With the wealth of knowledge and experience this Academy has, it cannot help but make an impact if each of us were to **GIVE**.

To explain that, several years ago I met a very devoted member of Lions International at Everett – just north of Seattle, Washington. Past District Governor Ed Davis was a kindly fellow, one who made an impact instantly on meeting. He had a motto which he included on some of his cards and stationery. Set out simply it appeared as **GIVE**. He explained to me, “John”, he said, “it means

**GET INVOLVED...it's VERY EXCITING.”**

Members of the Academy, it is within the scope of the ability of each of us to make an effective contribution — not just locally but, collectively, nationally and internationally if we G.I.V.E.

*John A. Battison of John March and Company Pty. Ltd., in Victoria, Australia, first became involved with NECA U.S.A. in 1977. The company has been affiliated with NECA Australia – Victoria Chapter (previously known as Electrical Contractors' Federation, Victoria) since 1917. He served on the NECA Australia – Victoria Chapter Council and Executive Committee for 20 years and was the Chapter President for four years and the Vice President for three years. He was also the National Vice President and President. He is presently serving as the NECA National representative on the Standards Australia-New Zealand EL/36 Committee for Standard AS/NZ 3760.*