



[HOME](#) [FASTENER NEWS](#) [MAGAZINE](#) [ABOUT US](#) [SEARCH](#)

CONSTRUCTION FIXINGS

Getting the SME voice heard

01-Oct-2015

This summer Phil Matten sat in on the General Assembly of the European Consortium of Anchor Producers in Barcelona, Spain. It set him reflecting on ECAP's development over 14 years, how SMEs in practice make their voice heard in European institutions, and the challenges of decision making in a democratic organisation.

ECAP was founded in 2001 through the urgent, perhaps even desperate, need for a small group of SME producers to rebalance the influence exercised by Hilti and Fischer over the development of the European Technical Approval system for concrete anchors. Not to put too fine a point on it, smaller anchor producers were caught on the hop, as ECAP's founder members tacitly acknowledged at the time. Some SME producers certainly had tried hard to gain access to the ETA decision process but felt their efforts were stymied by what was in effect a closed system.

Approved anchor products for safety critical applications are an absolute necessity and the development of an effective approvals system represents a major contribution to construction safety. Hilti and Fischer can justifiably be proud of that but given a relatively clear field it was virtually inevitable that the eventual mechanism would suit the bigger players and make it tougher for SMEs.

Ironically, having begun in effect as a protest movement against the high costs of obtaining ETAs, ECAP these days is one of the primary advocates of their importance in construction safety. Now, and in no small measure because of the support ECAP has provided, its member companies have the ETAs designed to ensure access to the entire EU market and to provide both safety assurance and the chance to compete on more even terms with the major brands.

The lessons of hindsight, though, are crystal clear. Let other people write the rules and you cannot be surprised when you find the game harder to play. When that happens there's no point in calling foul. The imperative is adapt and find ways to play the game competitively according to the rules that now exist – and to make sure you are in a position to exercise influence over the future revision and development of the rules.

That is precisely what ECAP has done and is doing – in the process creating a unparalleled in other areas of fastener related standards development. In fact P is now deeply involved in the standardisation of a far wider range of construction fixings: 3D nailing plates, woodscrews, concrete screws, as well as powder actuated tools and components. The 'Anchor Producers' in its name no longer really reflects ECAP's field of activities.

From an outsider's perspective there appears to be two pivotal factors in ECAP's genesis. Firstly: The passionate commitment of the Taddel family, both to the future of its Bossong business and to a far wider vision of ECAP. Secondly: The inspired appointment of Barbara Sorgato as ECAP secretary general.

Inspired? She certainly had the technical qualifications for the role. Previously an architect who practised in Germany she was responsible for the development of Bossong's technical department. That, though, misses the essence of the individual. A ready smile and a deceptively quizzical demeanour disguise a fierce, agile and extraordinarily lateral intelligence, combined with an equal tenacity in the pursuit of a chosen cause. These attributes have uniquely suited her to an ECAP role that demands both enduring patience and the incisiveness to, if not always cut through, certainly find the loose ends to unravel quite often truly Gordian knots. She might be self-effacing about that description – everyone that has encountered her, though, will acknowledge its accuracy.

On the technical front ECAP developed a crucial association with the Politecnico di Milano. Initially it provided the research and testing capability essential for ECAP members to economically achieve their ETAs – the relationship has grown stronger over subsequent years. Now the Polytechnic also carries out research to assist ECAP in influencing standards developments, assists in representation on European technical committees and runs educational courses on structural fastener technologies. It's not an exclusive relationship: ECAP now works closely with and has active projects with several other European technical institutions.

The development of ECAP's Anchor Calculation Program demonstrates the practical

[INDUSTRY NEWS](#)

[EXHIBITION NEWS](#)

[INSIGHT](#)

[CONSTRUCTION FIXINGS](#)

[MANUFACTURING TECHNOLOGY](#)

[MANAGEMENT + SYSTEMS](#)

[TECHNICAL](#)

[PRODUCT NEWS](#)

SUBSCRIBE TO THE MAGAZINE

CONSTRUCTION FIXINGS

Manufacturing ETA fixings

20-Oct-2015

Offering high performance fixing systems, and a full range of packing possibilities, pgb Polska ..

Fixing in high temperature

15-Oct-2015

Installing standard chemical anchors in tropical climates around the world can prove difficult, ..

High-quality, certified products

06-Oct-2015

Headquartered in Italy, G&B Fissaggi Srl offers a wide range of high-quality, certified prod..

Getting the SME voice heard

01-Oct-2015

This summer Phil Matten sat in on the General Assembly of the European Consortium of Anchor Prod..

Rothoblaas recognised for innovation

30-Sep-2015

At the 7th edition of the Schweighofer Prize in Vienna, Austria, Italian-based Rothoblaas was aw..

benefits of the consortium approach in providing a depth and quality of technical resource that no individual SME could contemplate funding. Originating from a Scandinavian project it is now underpinned by multinational technical resources and the active participation of ten ECAP members. Its distinctive advantage is in the greater transparency it affords its users. Barbara Sorgato explains: "ECAP engineers set up design rules based on discussions in several EU member states, which accurately reflect the requirements of the Eurocodes. From this base the program offers 'ECAP choices': Providing the transparency for customer engineers to make informed decisions about the solution for a particular application."

The fundamental achievement of ECAP to date, though, has been how it has assiduously established its legitimacy in the corridors of Brussels and the European standardisation environment. That has been aided, to some extent, by the EU's recognition over the last decade that it needed to ensure the voice of SMEs is heard and that standardisation is not entirely the product of financial firepower. Two examples demonstrate ECAP's success. It has been appointed to two committees of the EU's 'Europe 2020' growth strategy. In addition to achieving observer status at CEN a more significant recognition of Barbara Sorgato's effectiveness and integrity is that the latter now speaks at the Standing Committee on Construction on behalf of all the SME members of Small Business Standards (SBS). SBS is an organisation part funded by the EU to support SMEs in participating in standards work.

ECAP's success in establishing a voice in EU institutions is the product of perseverance and meticulous attention to detail – intelligently tempered with a recognition that success in these environments cannot solely be the result of single-minded pursuit of self interest, but must seek to accommodate the needs of all stakeholders.

The time and travel commitments involved are, however, gruelling. Barbara Sorgato, supported by project manager Luisa Caimi and the Politecnico di Milano, attends an average of seventy-eight meetings around Europe every year. Add to that two board meetings and a general assembly annually, plus nine working group meetings preparing contributions to CEN working groups covering products and design rules ranging from connectors in concrete and wood construction, through wood connectors, to powder actuated tools and related components such as nails and fixing cartridges. As a SBS board member Barbara Sorgato regularly attends meetings with EOTA and the European Commission. She is also invited by CEN to speak on behalf of EU SMEs at seminars on standardisation – including recently one for EU parliamentarians. ECAP is also a member of Construction Products Europe, on behalf of which Barbara Sorgato sits on the EOTA technical board.

It is an extraordinary workload that clearly underlines what it takes for SMEs to achieve effective representation in Brussels and Europe's standards organisations. ECAP members clearly believe it is worthwhile. The consortium now has twenty member companies – the latest formerly welcomed at the Barcelona General Assembly. Representing companies from nine countries its strength lies in its transnational nature – a very European organisation tackling Europe-wide issues and needs.

The blend of business origins and cultures in a non-profit organisation that must operate on strict and transparent democratic principles presents a fascinating – and surely on occasions challenging – internal dynamic. For the working groups there are inevitably differences of viewpoints but the goals are fairly clearly defined and there is a common technical language. The General Assembly presents a rather different situation at which the CEOs and senior management of the membership come together once a year. It's a long meeting split over an afternoon and morning, punctuated, one imagines to everyone's relief, by a relaxed social dinner. While the board and general secretary bring the agenda to the table it is one – and a large one now – surrounded by people accustomed to making decisions within their own distinctive businesses. Here, though, they are expected to review progress, determine ECAP's successes or failures, and above all input to and decide its future strategy within an organisation of equals.

It takes time and patience. It very clearly does espouse the principles of democracy. It has to accommodate differing levels of knowledge and rates of comprehension. That means, on occasions, deferral of decisions, perhaps overnight, perhaps for the board or a working group to come back with a more specific proposal. Certainly there are elements of frustration but to the independent observer they are surprisingly seldom visible and appear not to detract from achieving steady, at least, progress. Several factors are at work to achieve that eventual coherency: An underlying confidence in a board and presidency, which is elected every three years; meticulous preparation and knowledge from the secretariat; a clear track record of success in delivering benefits to its membership; and a mutual respect and commitment to achieve consensus.

Could it be done differently? Unquestionably. Could it be done better? Probably not. ECAP has evolved a series of mechanisms to suit the diverse nature of its membership and focus effectively on the points of common interest without impinging on its members' commercial independence.

ECAP started almost as a protest movement; it has evolved into a remarkably influential lobbying organisation effectively representing specific strands of its members' interests. On the way it has established a set of core values on which the ECAP 'brand' stands.

While it clearly has a continued and significant role in representing both its own

members and SME interests in the standards arena, there is a reasonable argument that the major challenges are now in the past. From being an outsider trying to find a way in, ECAP has established a strong, apparently stable and increasingly respected role within key European institutions.

The question, now, for its board and its members is what will ECAP be in the coming decade? How will it leverage the strengths it has undoubtedly developed? Characteristically, that means research within its membership to define not just its priorities but also the precise role it can play in continuing to contribute to construction safety, as well as strengthening its member companies.

It will be interesting to watch both the way it arrives at those conclusions and what they will be.

www.ecap-sme.org