EU is giving support for digital transformation

A new age of information technology is here, and digitalisation will have an effect on all FIEC's lobbying activity, now and in the future

Digitalisation is talked about every day in FIEC at the moment, and it relates to all our other lobbying work, while our recent joint industry manifesto set out what we need in the construction sector, to support the transformation to digital construction.

Two of FIEC's requests appear to be have been partially met by a recent proposal for the Digital Europe programme, which sets out action in several key areas for the period 2021 to 2027.

To cope with the vast amount of data that needs to be processed and exchanged, not only for building information modelling (BIM), but also to support artificial intelligence (AI) and digital processes in construction, massive computing power is required.

Super computers, quantum computing – whatever term is chosen, all of these refer to a new age of information technology.

Calculations will be faster and the volume of data that can be processed is mind blowing – a billion billion calculations per second.

Very few companies have such technology at the moment, and a related challenge is the lack of skilled experts in the field. Moreover, at a Digitising European Industry event earlier this year in Paris, the audience heard that there is only one company in the world that had an operating system capable of supporting such computing.

The Digital Europe programme seeks to close the gap between the capacity we have now and what we need. The initiative is not for just one industry, but as it does not refer to construction in particular, FIEC is seeking amendments to highlight the fact that our sector in particular desperately needs action such as that contained in the proposal.

Already becoming increasingly urgent, the protection of data and systems takes on even greater importance when you consider the extent to which data will dominate our lives – and the theft of it and hacking of systems will threaten everyday business operations, and our personal routine activities.

As well as potentially halting construction works, a cyber attack could disable infrastructure, causing chaos on the roads, railways and in airports. Energy supply could be disrupted, causing discomfort to millions of citizens at home and at work, and worse, building security systems, including those specifically for our protection, could be sabotaged, putting lives at risk.

The programme addresses the challenge with co-investment (from the EU and Member States) in advanced cybersecurity equipment, infrastructures and know-how.

Supercomputing, blockchain, cybersecurity – all of these require expertise which is not readily available. The European Commission states that "there are currently 350,000 vacancies in these fields across the EU."

We need to educate not only our future apprentices and graduates, but also upskill our existing workers. Proposed action includes on the job training in both competence centres and companies, university courses in advanced digital technologies, and short-term professional training in skills such as cybersecurity.

In construction, we should be thinking about how to meet this specific challenge, with the support of the programme, and FIEC will address this matter in its Construction 4.0 Working Group.

Not surprisingly, AI is not left out of the programme, which proposes among other things, to develop libraries of algorithms which will be available to businesses and the public sector.

REAL-LIFE CONDITIONS

EU and Member State co-investment in reference sites for testing and experimentation in real-life conditions, open to all relevant potential users across Europe, will support the development of new processes.

For construction, this could really help to support capacity building and in turn the transition to digitalisation. Digital innovation hubs, which already exist under the Digitising European Industry initiative will be connected to these reference sites, ensuring a coherent approach.

A related initiative was launched by the European Commission earlier this year. The High Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence has 52 experts from academia, civil society and industry. It was set up to support the implementation of Europe's AI strategy.

Europe is way behind the US and China in terms of investment in and deployment of AI.

This is the final strand of the programme and it tackles specific sectors including public administration, transport, energy and environment and education. This is where FIEC will seek to have construction specifically included and amendments have been proposed to the European Parliament.

By way of follow up, our Construction 4.0 Working Group will consider how to make best use of this programme, assuming it is eventually adopted by the co-legislators – the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union.

Although FIEC still needs to have internal discussions, at first glance this programme looks as though it will help the construction industry to tackle some of the biggest challenges posed by digitalisation.

We need this kind of practical help in the industry. It's becoming a cliché, but things are changing so fast. This proposal will have been months at least in preparation so its release at almost the same time as the European Construction Industry Manifesto for Digitalisation is a happy coincidence.

The fact that it addresses many of our requests does not mean we can relax. There is so much to do. In the coming months, FIEC will be very active in several initiatives, aimed at supporting construction companies through the transformation. No doubt the subject will be covered again soon in this column. ce

> "A cyber attack could disable infrastructure, causing chaos on the roads, railways and in airports"

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