How Product Certification Conversations Can Prevent A Disaster

Each year in the UK, many thousands of buildings are developed or renovated – there are some aspects you'll find in every single one of those projects, such as a number of electrical components linked together to form circuits.

By Paul Dawson,
Commercial Director, Niglon.

You'd think given the raft of regulations surrounding the electrical industry, that all of those products would be utterly safe, and that the chance of a potentially faulty product making its way up the supply chain and into a development would be extremely low.

And yet, at Niglon we are seeing a real increase in the number of untested or poorly tested products which are being brought to the market without the sort of stringent safety certification any developer or contractor would hope would be in place as a matter of course.

As someone who's spent more than three decades in the industry, it's extremely worrying to see this increase – partly because of the reputational damage that unscrupulous manufacturers can do to the electrical sector as a whole, but mostly because of the very real risk to people and properties.

A product which hasn't been properly tested is essentially a ticking timebomb. One that's going to be unknowingly placed into a home, a hotel, an office or a hospital. There's a chance that it will be fine, the product will never fail and no harm will come to those living in or using the development in question.

But are we really willing to keep taking these risks?

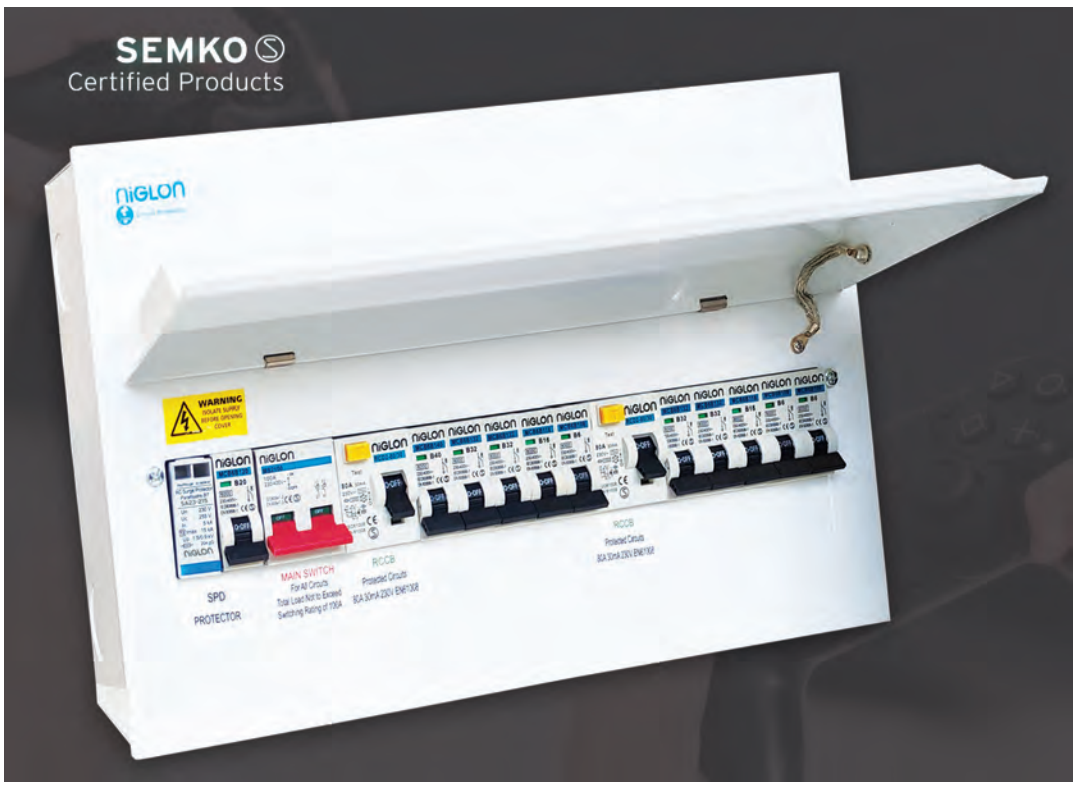
Solving the problem

The solution to the problem is simple, but it does require everyone in the supply chain to come together for the common goal of eradicating unsafe products from the market.

The first thing we must do is speak out about the issue: lots of developers and contractors (and even more end users) have no clue that these products are not tested and therefore potentially dangerous. So, the onus is on those of us who are aware to educate everyone. And when I say everyone, I really do mean everyone: suppliers, wholesalers, contractors, developers, and the general public.

This means we can all begin to have certification conversations as a matter of course. When developers sit down to plan which electrical products they will use in their latest projects, if they're sourcing new components they won't just ask about the specifications and price, the matter of testing will come up in the discussions too.

An important part of those conversations is requesting proof of certification, which suppliers should have available as a matter of course, to ensure that they have the documentation to back up their claims that a product has been properly tested. At Niglon, we display accreditation where appropriate on our website and within our brochures, and then provide certification proof whenever we are asked. There's no reason why this couldn't be adopted right across the industry.



The benefits

Naturally, the absolute priority is safeguarding all those using the buildings where these products end up. The horrific consequences of the Grenfell Tower disaster – the origins of which were traced back to a faulty electrical product, albeit with a number of other factors at play which worsened the outcome – should be fresh in all of our minds. Without tackling the issue of uncertified products, another Grenfell is a tragic but inevitable outcome at some point in the future.

If products are not thoroughly and independently tested by a third-party, we cannot give those reassurances to public that they are going to work reliably. Above and beyond the safety implications, this also has serious reputational ramifications.

By casting aside any friendly rivalry between competing firms – which is something I strongly believe we should do when it comes to public safety – we are able to collectively raise standards across the industry. And this doesn't just have a positive impact on the manufacturers and suppliers themselves, but also everyone in the supply chain and indeed the developers and contractors who are committed to using properly-tested products within all of their projects.

Making the right choices

If there's one disadvantage to making choices centred principally around safety, it's that they're often not the cheapest products you can source. We've faced decisions like this numerous times over the past few years: partnering with companies committed to high standards of testing, or purchasing products for a much lower price. The more expensive option might go against business instincts about making as much profit as possible, but it's the right thing to do – and that comes first and foremost, every time.

As well as the complex legal repercussions, and the emotional fall-out from knowing a product you had supplied was faulty, if the worst happened then there would be very little point in having made some savings along the way. Your company's reputation, and that of the individuals responsible for making purchasing decisions, would probably be irretrievably damaged.

It's not worth the risk. And it's also not worth waiting until another disaster happens before we begin having these conversations around certification. One Grenfell is one too many – please join Niglon in eradicating untested and poorly tested products from the market, and let's diffuse the bomb before it goes off.

Author bio

Paul Dawson is the Commercial Director at Niglon, a company with seven decades of history which supplies more than 4,000 products to wholesalers the length and breadth of the UK, including control & automation, wiring accessories, circuit protection and much more.

Paul began his career more than 30 years ago as a trainee electrician, before moving into sales and up to director level. Since joining Niglon, Paul has bolstered sales, partnered with the Electrical Industries Charity, and led calls across the industry for independent testing and proof of certification.