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Heroes

OF STANDARDS AND CODES



EXCLUSIVE

INTERVIEW WITH
VICE PRESIDENT,
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARDS
*UL STANDARDS
& ENGAGEMENT*

GET TO KNOW HER SONYA BIRD

GLOBAL HARMONIZER BY DAY
CREATIVE CRAFTER BY NIGHT



TAKE A PEEK INTO THE LIFE OF AN INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS LEADER AND HOW SHE HARMONIZES GLOBAL SAFETY TO PROTECT FUTURE GENERATIONS.

MEET **SONYA BIRD**

SONYA BIRD, UL STANDARDS & ENGAGEMENT'S VICE PRESIDENT OF INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS, IS AN INDUSTRY CORNERSTONE WHOSE GLOBAL REACH IS GROUNDED IN NORTH CAROLINA ROOTS AND THE SHARED CREATIVITY OF HER GRANDDAUGHTERS.

Sonya is one of the lucky ones who found her calling right out of college, answering a simple ad for “an engineer with writing skills.” What began with drafting requirements for portable power tools has evolved into a career leading international teams across the US, Mexico, India, China, and Singapore. By advocating for gender-responsive standards and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, she works to ensure that safety requirements are inclusive and the planet remains resilient for those who follow.

Her leadership transforms complex technical consensus into a universal language of trust that transcends borders and industries. While her days are filled with early morning calls and complex harmonization efforts, her “why” is deeply personal. As a grandmother of three beautiful granddaughters, she views standards as a way to quietly build a safer, more sustainable world for the next generation. Whether she is dabbling with watercolor paints or navigating high-level diplomacy at the intersection of technical rigor and human trust, Sonya ensures that every voice in the global community is heard.

"A standard only matters if people can actually use it."

THE GLOBAL ARCHITECT

A LOOK AT THE LEADERSHIP AND COORDINATION REQUIRED TO MANAGE INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SYSTEMS.

FEATURE

Walk us through your role and core responsibilities.

How does your work support technical committees and the standards development process?

Answer: "I am responsible for our international standards outreach and presence, including our harmonization efforts with other standards organizations, and our participation in and adoption of IEC and ISO standards. This means that I am also very active in ANSI, helping to influence ANSI and USNC positions on global issues and relationships. A key part of my work involves coordinating with international partners to support alignment across regions so standards can be used effectively around the world. So, when we talk about 'working for a safer world' that is exactly what we mean - we encourage use of ULSE standards to address safety challenges globally. My amazing team - located in the US, Mexico, India, China, and Singapore - builds relationships at the local level in order to better understand standards needs within the local region."

What is the biggest misconception people have about standards professionals when they first get involved?

Answer: "Many people assume standards work is purely administrative. In reality, it requires judgment, diplomacy, and problem-solving. The work doesn't stop with developing a standard - it also involves helping the right stakeholders understand why it matters and how it can be used to address today's most pressing safety risks. At its core, standards work is about bringing diverse expertise together and turning it into shared understanding, which is both challenging and deeply collaborative."

If you had to choose a metaphor for your role - architect, conductor, referee, or something else - which fits best, and why?

Answer: "A conductor. My role isn't to play every instrument, but to make sure the right sounds come together at the right time, stay aligned, and move toward a shared outcome. When it works well, the result is something no single contributor could create alone."



How do you help ensure that standards remain relevant and usable in the real world, not just technically sound on paper?

Answer: “**A standard only matters if people can actually use it.** Part of my role is helping ensure that standards are developed with real-world application in mind - who will rely on them, how they’ll be implemented, and what challenges people may face along the way. That means encouraging clear language, practical requirements, and early engagement with the communities who will use the standard so it can genuinely improve safety. At ULSE, we value diversity across stakeholders and geographies, recognizing that inclusive representation strengthens the perspectives brought into our discussions.”

What emerging technology or trend do you believe will require the most critical standards development over the next five years?

Answer: “Electrification and digitally connected systems - especially those shaping how we live, move, and transition to new sources of power - will require sustained standards leadership. As these technologies scale globally, standards will play a critical role in ensuring safety and reliability, and in helping people trust the products, devices, and systems they depend on wherever they are. I’m proud that ULSE is leading the way in standards development related to batteries and energy storage systems, both critical to support the energy transition. As batteries get more powerful, and as chemistries change, the standards will need to change as well.”

YOUR CAREER HAS SHIFTED FROM LOCAL PROJECT MANAGEMENT TO GLOBAL STRATEGY. HOW DO YOU APPROACH "HARMONIZING" TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS ACROSS DIFFERENT BORDERS?

Answer: "My work has always been about connecting technical expertise to real outcomes. Early on, I led efforts for portable power tools, which was one of the first ULSE’s standards to be harmonized with other organizations. **We quickly realized that instead of just looking at North American partners like CSA and ANCE, it made more sense to pivot toward global, IEC-based standards.** Today, I use that background to strengthen our global engagement. **It’s about building relationships at the local level** in places like India or Singapore so we can understand regional needs, **then bringing that data back to the international stage to ensure safety expectations are consistent and trusted everywhere.**"

THE SILENT IMPACT



Sonya and her three granddaughters.

THE SOCIETAL VALUE & PERSONAL MOTIVATION BEHIND SAFETY-CRITICAL WORK.

Beyond the day-to-day, are there specific global initiatives that drive your passion for this work?

Answer: “I’ve been lucky to have even greater impact through international work. Regarding the UN Sustainable Development Goals, I was quite active in IEC in building a system to encourage standards to support the 17 SDGs. As a grandmother of three beautiful granddaughters, I want to make sure that we are building a more sustainable world. I also participated in the joint strategic advisory group between IEC and ISO to establish tools for gender-responsive standards. For example, ULSE found that a female reacts to electric shock at a lesser threshold than men do - so we made sure the ULSE standard for emergency responders included that lower threshold to ensure everyone is protected.”

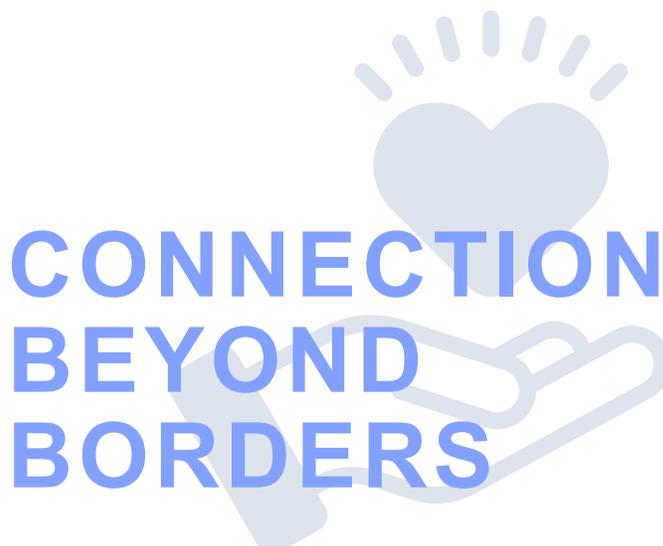
What keeps you coming back to this demanding work year after year?

Answer: “The impact and the people. Standards quietly shape how the world works, and being part of a global community that brings together different perspectives is deeply motivating. The work can be demanding, but knowing it contributes to safer systems and greater trust makes it worth it. I feel good knowing that I’m making a difference globally - working for a safer world.”

PREVENTION. PURPOSE. IMPACT.

What was your true “aha” moment - the experience that made you commit to standards development long-term?

Answer: “The ‘aha’ came when I saw how a well-developed standard could quietly prevent problems before they ever occurred. Being involved in such a consumer-focused standard as portable tools, and reading about real-life injuries which we were able to address through standards changes, was eye-opening. Knowing that this work helps keep people safe - often without anyone realizing it - was incredibly meaningful to me and made it clear that standards were where I wanted to focus my career.”



CONNECTION BEYOND BORDERS

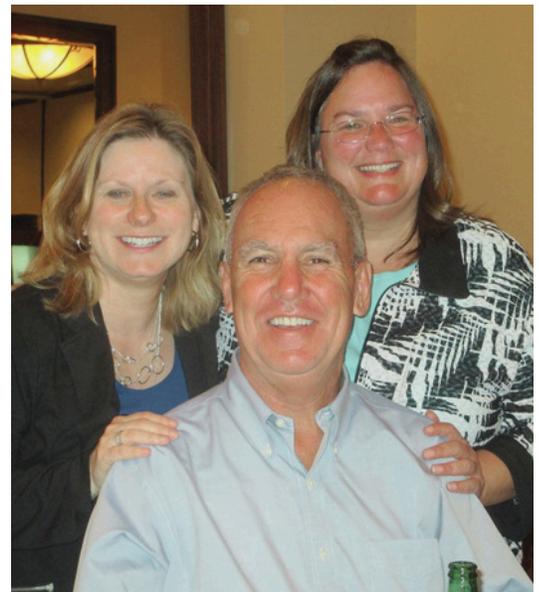
MENTORSHIP, PERSONAL PASSIONS, AND
THE LOGISTICS OF GLOBAL
COLLABORATION.

What advice would you give to a young professional considering getting involved as a volunteer technical expert?

Answer: “Get involved early and don’t underestimate the value of your perspective. Standards work benefits from fresh thinking, and early-career professionals often ask the questions that improve clarity and usability. You don’t need decades of experience to contribute meaningfully. Also, build that network! I have been lucky in my career to build an amazing network of standards friends both in the US and globally. There is always someone who I can reach out to for advice, or just to bounce an idea off them. And it is amazing to have friends literally around the world!”

What is the most challenging aspect of collaborating with a diverse group of international stakeholders?

Answer: “Balancing different priorities and regulatory approaches while maintaining technical integrity. Reaching consensus across regions requires patience and compromise, but that complexity is also what gives global standards their strength and legitimacy. And, of course, the logistics of international work requires MANY early morning calls. Or Late calls. Or both on the same day! So, although technology allows us to meet virtually, it can lead to very long days.”



Sonya’s “Heroes,” Sarah Brooks and Don Snyder, are retired ULSE colleagues who were instrumental to her success.

CONNECTION BEYOND BORDERS (CNT'D)

When you finally step away from managing complex timelines, how do you recharge?

Answer: “I love crafting. I’ve started dabbling with watercolor paints, and it’s so much fun! I also love crafting with kids and having special days where we simply create. I went from doing this with my kids, to with some of my nephews/nieces, to now my granddaughters!”

If your consensus committee was meeting at your house, what food would you serve, and why does it feel appropriate for a consensus-driven group?

Answer: “Being from NC, it would have to be pork BBQ, as a way to celebrate local cuisine (an important step of global standardization).”

Sonya and head of East Asia regional standards Eric Zhang.



RAPID FIRE Q'S WITH SONYA

What's the last great book you read (fiction or non-fiction)? Answer: *The Nightingale*, by Kristin Hannah

What is your favorite comfort food? Answer: Tacos

If you could instantly become fluent in any one language, which would it be?
Answer: Mandarin Chinese

Are you a morning person or a night owl? Answer: Definitely a morning person. I do much better with 6am calls than 10pm calls!

What is one thing you are surprisingly bad at? Answer: Not sure that it’s a surprise but golf is not my game!

If you had a personal theme song, what would it be? Answer: “*Some of It*” by Eric Church.

What is one small ritual that makes your day better? Answer: Music – love listening to music (and singing along)

Which city or country is still at the top of your travel bucket list? Answer: Spain

Presented by:

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*Accuris is proud to champion the efforts of every individual who dedicates their expertise and time to the standards community. Our **SDO Hero Campaign** is dedicated to recognizing the profound societal value of consensus-driven standards - the essential foundation for a safer, smarter, and more sustainable world. We believe the true strength of this industry lies not just in the documents themselves, but in the **human commitment** of the staff and volunteers who create them. By spotlighting their stories, we aim to elevate the dignity of standards work, boost involvement by demystifying the process for future engineers, and reinforce the professional prestige associated with this vital craft.*

Accuris thanks the heroes of yesterday, today, and tomorrow for their unwavering dedication to integrity and innovation.

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