



**Peter Grant on moisture testing**

# Damp subfloor? Search me, says contractor!

CLOSE on a decade ago I was employed as UK product manager with Protimeter when it was still in Marlow, Buckinghamshire.

We had not long launched the Protimeter moisture measurement system (or MMS as it has come to be known).

The MMS will be familiar to many flooring professionals as it has all the functionality needed to cover the bases required, namely a pin type wood moisture measurement facility; a capacitance 'search mode' which indicates that there may be issues both on the surface of materials but also, crucially, below the surface within solid substrates; a hygrometer mode (together with condensation indication in real time by the use of a surface temperature probe).

The hygrometer mode, using the Hygrostick, together with a surface humidity box allows for compliance with BS 8201, BS 8203 and BS 5325 standards (max 75% RH).

What could be better in terms of the requirements of the floor fitter, whether it be Mrs Smiths 10m of laminate, a larger solid wood installation or a commercial specialist vinyl contract of 1000m or more?

We sold an MMS to a flooring contractor living

and working in an off shore location where domestic contracts tend to be larger in average than on mainland UK.

Two months later I received a technical call in Marlow: 'Hello, can you help me? I have recently installed a solid oak floor in a large mansion and the job's gone terribly wrong.'

'What's the problem?' I say.

'Well the floor has taken up moisture and not only have the boards cupped massively with all the expansion joints being closed up, it has pushed out two courses of bricks, causing major structural damage to the building.'

I sat in stunned silence before asking how he had taken moisture readings in the subfloor prior to installation. He said he had bought an MMS from us. So I asked about the RH readings he had obtained from the screed.

His answer was he never used any function other than the search mode!

'OK,' says I, trying to remain composed and professional. 'What values did you obtain in search mode?' ('rel' as displayed on the MMS).

'Oh between 270 and 600,' he replies. This really needs further investigation, whether one is adhering to BS standards.

'Did the alarm bells not ring?' I asked.

'No,' was the reply. 'It always reads in this region and if I took notice I would never lay a floor! I have never had a problem with this before'.

Maybe with Mrs Smith's 10m of laminate laid over Cellotex there would not be a problem, but with a large solid wood installation, the consequences of taking short cuts can be dire. Unless one happens to have built up a substantial cash cushion in the business or is of independent means, then disasters of this magnitude will sink the average business in a very short time, insurance or no insurance.

Moisture, it's measurement and it's understanding is the most vital component of the floorlayer's craft. Forget fancy luxury vinyl tile patterns, perfectly crafted nosings, professional vinyl welds and well stretched carpets – if the subfloor is wet, you need to know and then some!

Don't mess about, get booked on the next available moisture specialist course – it could save your business, and that's no joke. **CFJ**

**Peter Grant is an independent consultant**

■ T: 01780 410588

■ Mobile: 07885 221675

■ Email: pgrant@tesco.net



**Martin Cummins on product guarantees**

# Product guarantees not worth the paper?

WE at Laybond Bostik are often approached by contractors keen to use one of our products for a particular installation, yet the product, may in our opinion not be ideal given the nature and/or conditions of its intended use.

When we explain our misgivings, often we are told that A.N.Other manufacturer guarantees its products (similar in nature) for the installation; so why won't we?

The contractor's real question should be exactly what manufacturers are guaranteeing, and what's the value of any guarantee given the almost infinite number of variables under which a product can be used.

Although not a contractor myself, I have been in flooring for nearly 20 years with much of my career assessing different products from different companies under various circumstances. My role includes drafting technical application documents (datasheets) for products that if used in accordance with them we can ensure (is this the same as guarantee?) product performance.

Recently with commercial pressures forcing people to chase business more vigorously technical departments are, occasionally,

underwriting datasheets with written letters extending the parameters defined by the datasheet.

It is not uncommon to see coverage rates extended, thicknesses reduced and higher percentage-RH rates quoted. My concern is - if companies are convinced that their product is suitable, why are these extended limits not included in the original datasheets?

Do the datasheets simply define the safety margin knowing that products will be used beyond them and they merely confirm this in writing? I doubt this, as it is always the contractors asking to extend usage rather than the manufacturer offering it!

There is a large gray area regarding product use and performance and I would be wrong to preach from a moral high ground when I know that we ourselves are sometimes flexible about the performance of our products (although only ever site specific after evaluating with the contractor the possible risks and, sometimes, the extra precautions needed) and their performance characteristics.

In real-world applications given a

product's characteristics and the variable conditions under which it could be used, many installations will be fine, but you must always factor in the increased element of risk added to the job.

It is too often claimed that manufacturers, as well as contractors, always look to 'get out' of liability with an installation failure and you must remember this when considering the risk factors. Most contractors receiving a verbal or written guarantee won't actually know what has been guaranteed.

For example, a recent job was brought to my attention by a colleague – an extension to a kitchen which obviously had an old part and a new with a joint. They knew the floor was wet so the installers put down a membrane, applied latex and followed this with Luxury Vinyl Tiles (LVT).

Our first concern is the use of the latex because the LVT manufacturer would always promote harder smoothing compounds, an added safety for the floorcovering which are very strong themselves. So when the installer said he was having problems it was assumed it was the LVT ripping the latex apart, but

this was not the case.

The installer had to return three times over the following years, firstly, after a couple of weeks when a few tiles had lost their adhesion (typical snagging!!). They had failed to get into the product during its open time, so they simply replaced the unbonded tiles.

They returned again after about 12 months for a problem across the joint following some movement, which again was unsurprising and sorted.

The third visit, after four years, was when they found de-lamination of the latex; they had sanded the floor but not primed (the bond to the subfloor under tension would have been superior if they had used the appropriate primer). The contractor asked 'do I have to replace it?'

The simple answer is that we can't say. Was it product failure or workmanship failure and if the latter, how long do you guarantee workmanship? Should a workmanship guarantee last as long as the product guarantee? A datasheet is the circumstance under what it 'will' work.

Beyond this it 'may' work and this is nothing more than a wriggle

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# 'Sustainability: Contractors cannot escape!'

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sustainability debate which can make a real difference to flooring contractors is effective waste management.

The UK construction industry is responsible for producing over 36 million tonnes of landfill waste every year, leading the Government to introduce hefty landfill taxes and other waste management regulations that encourage the diversion of waste from landfill.

In principle, thanks to the installation of Altro's in-house safety flooring recycling system, we could recycle 100% of our safety flooring, depending on collection networks and contamination issues.

We have recently taken part in a UK industry led, government

## Richard Kahn

funded trial to provide a viable collection scheme for post installation safety flooring waste.

The trial proved extremely successful and we are currently working on the best way of rolling this out to all customers. This will reduce the amount of waste sent to landfill, lower operating costs and offer contractors a tangible competitive advantage when tendering for projects.

Sustainable products are increasingly being regarded as a necessity rather than an expendable luxury.

In fact, the Joint Contracts Tribunal (JCT) recently amended its contracts to include new sustainability provisions on waste

reduction and the use of recycled material.

More than 70% of all projects in Britain are built under a JCT contract so this will have a real impact on contractors who will be forced to improve their sustainability performance in order to win new business.

But it's not just the sustainability of products that you need to consider. In the future, tenders will place as much importance on the environmental performance of manufacturers as the products themselves.

As well as recommending the right materials, flooring contractors will have to demonstrate that they are sourcing products from sustainable suppliers, who should be able to provide clear and honest

information about their manufacturing processes and business practices. After all, in these greener times it is important to not just know how green a company's products are, but also how environmentally responsible it is as a business.

At Altro we constantly look at ways to reduce our environmental impact, a fact illustrated by our recent listing in the Sunday Times Green List 2009.

Our dedicated sustainability website, [www.altro6steps.com](http://www.altro6steps.com), summarises the work we have done to improve the sustainability of our whole business operations and offers a useful reference point for flooring contractors who are looking to win business with environmentally conscious architects and developers.

Once, the main considerations on flooring products were purely price and performance. Now, the environment is undoubtedly a major factor and the degree of influence it has over construction decisions will increase over the next few years.

Interior surfaces are a key component of sustainable building projects and we are dedicated to working with flooring contractors and building professionals to contribute to a more sustainable approach to construction.

This is far from a straightforward issue but those that rely on facts rather than opinion will side-step the greenwash and be best placed to offer clients good advice. **CFJ**

# Guarantees not worth the paper?

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factor or a saved excuse for when it fails. If the membrane had been primed we would not have had a leg to stand on, but it hadn't so the risk level was higher.

Another example is where we were asked to guarantee that our smoothing compound would stick to 'what's there', which we would, but if the 'what's there' decides to come away from the floor at a later date, then that's not our problem – our product did its job and stuck to the 'what's there'.

In this instance the contractor

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said that another manufacturer would guarantee their product for the installation, but what were they guaranteeing? Probably the exact same as us!!

So when the floorcovering fails, bringing with it the smoothing compound and the 'what's there' material below, will the guarantee save the contractor's bacon?

It is too easy to be reassured by guarantees, but often they do little more than say that a product will do what it's meant to do if used

properly and in conditions and circumstances defined by the datasheet.

In my opinion a datasheet is all that is being guaranteed and when a company deviates from this you must make sure you know exact what is being covered and what risk you are taking – it could be far more costly than choosing the right product in the first place. **CFJ**

**Martin Cummins is technical training manager at Laybond**

Further information on  
 ■ T: 01244 674774

## THE GLUES BROTHERS by Bob Lawton

