

Help and advice



Peter Kaczmar on installing wood flooring

Sometimes even the experts can't agree

BEST practice in the installation of wood flooring is dependent first and foremost on a sound understanding of how wood behaves. A new guide from TRADA will be published soon.

Short-cuts and inappropriate installation practice can cost the wood flooring contractor hundreds of times the initial saving to put right.

How many times has this warning been given? But how often has it been heeded? In these times of growing financial insecurity, can you really afford to shell out money on putting right faults which have occurred through bad practice or lack of knowledge?

The majority of floor failures are down to a lack of understanding of how wood behaves in service and how these dynamics are inextricably embedded into recognised good practice guidance.

However, one can also sympathise with installers because this problem is not always of their own making, but often exacerbated by market developments.

The crux of the problem is that information available to wood floor installers is, at best, fragmented and, at worst, does not reflect current advances in flooring manufacture.

At least part of the reason for this is that product technology innovations are advancing at a rate which is increasingly out of step with established doctrines of best practice.

I was clearly reminded of this while working on a document which aims to collate recognised expert opinion and guidance in the form of a 'one-stop-shop' guide to installation of wood flooring. The guide aims to assemble recognised installation practices and explore some of the technical and practical principals behind them.

There are two prerequisites for best practice: An understanding of how wood behaves as a floorcovering material and technical knowledge of its limitations.

TRADA is to publish a definitive wood flooring installation guide

It is only with this knowledge that installers can ever be prompted into actually thinking about why certain installation techniques and approaches are recommended and what may happen if they are not implemented. This is the crucial first step in installation practice, insofar as thought leads to preventative action.

I was made aware of the fact that accepted installation protocols are being blurred at the edges when a draft of the guide was circulated to a number of expert bodies for comment and feedback.

It was immediately clear that in some areas there is relatively little consensus or agreement on some of the finer points of installation practices. This was unheard of several years ago when the technology of wood floor coverings was less sophisticated.

My conclusion is that rapid developments and sophisticated product innovation seem to be blurring opinion as to what guidance actually holds true. A very basic example of this is found in the tendency of suppliers to import increasingly wider dimensioned boards — up to 200mm or even greater — often without providing the necessary backup by way of appropriate installation guidance.

For example, if the board is 200 x 20mm, what strategies are available to the installer to prevent distortion in the form of cupping, or for that matter what provisions should be adopted to allow for lateral movement?

Does the installer attempt to minimise the likelihood of cupping by selecting quarter-sawn material? — impractical and expensive — or is it better to acclimatise the boards exactly to the ambient conditions expected in service? — making it almost impossible to enforce the

required degree of stability.

The problems don't stop there! What if the boards are to be stuck down — what glue does will minimise the potential of movement? And having selected the adhesive what preparatory measures of the subfloor and application techniques should be adopted? Or is it prudent to specify a board with a more realistic aspect ratio to begin with?

In such a situation, installers often turn to the experts and are confronted by a number of informed opinions each of which may have a sound technical basis but may differ in their practical outcome, depending on how the problem is presented.

It is then left with the installer to select whichever advice he or she feels most comfortable with (which may not always equate to the right approach).

These questions can only be answered through a fundamental technical understanding of the manner in which wood behaves. It is for this reason that the TRADA installation guide has been drafted, in order to bring together all the accepted installation guidance together, under one cover, in the form of a united body of opinion.

It is intended as much for the technical community as for the installer, in that it seeks to consolidate the existing body of technical information in a single concise document which addresses current product developments and which can be used both as a technical reference as well as a step-by-step guide to installation.

In this way it is hoped that the guide will serve as a benchmark for installers and help demystify the process of specification and product selection to benefit the industry. **CFJ**

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