

Help and advice



**Martin Cummins on changes in the flooring industry**

## From crunchy nuts to climate obsessives

IT may not be apparent to many of us in the flooring industry just how much has changed during our careers.

A floor is a floor after all, so surely other than fashion changes (brighter, more varied colours, logos, etc) the products are there to perform a function. The function – safe, comfortable, hardwearing and decorative – is still the same, isn't it??

However, take a leap back 30 years or so and visualise a typical flooring installation.

Floorcoverings for contract work would have included crunchy vinyl tiles (with asbestos), foam backed carpets, plenty of linoleum and cork products, and a very limited range of sheet vinyls with fibre-bonded carpets still being in their infancy.

The smoothing compound range was basically latex with standard water mixes and

adhesives were most often highly solvented.

Although flooring was typically completed as one of the final jobs in a building, competing with other trades for available time and space was not the major issue.

Often site conditions, however, were very poor with health & safety a pretty much unknown phenomena.

The product ranges were generally simple and clear.

The methodology and approach to the installation were also straightforward as fitters knew what products they needed and how to install them. Halcyon days...or maybe not!!

But the flooring industry has moved on. There is now a much greater variety of floorcoverings, required to be laid on a much wider variety of floors, in a much greater variety of circumstances.

The purpose of the flooring may

now be different, requiring it to fulfil acoustic needs, conductive properties, ease of removal and replacement etc.

No two flooring installations can now ever be assumed to be the same, especially with the inclusion of new materials and situations such as calcium sulphate screeds, floating timber floors or under floor heating.

Additionally, moisture problems are much more prevalent due to fast tracking of projects and also the types of floorcoverings being used.

Add to this the health & safety and time pressures (particularly from our friend the PFI project) and suddenly a flooring contractor has a lot more to consider.

So if products have changed, site situations and conditions have changed, substrates are changing, time pressures are changing, legislation is changing,

you have to ask yourself ....are you changing too?

Manufacturers and trade organisations have a responsible part in this ever changing environment and need to ensure the correct understanding, knowledge and information is available to the flooring contractor.

However, they cannot make you change...as the old psychiatrist light bulb joke goes...you have to want to change.

The most successful companies will be the ones prepared to move with the times, to invest in training of both long-termers and newcomers to the industry and to embrace new products and methodologies.

Over the next few months I'll be looking at what's changed over the years but more importantly what's changing in the industry

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**David Gatfield on dealing with moisture**

## Finding damp? Don't cross your fingers (or your legs)!

THE Contract Flooring Association describes dampness as 'the biggest cause of failure in contemporary flooring installations'.

And who would disagree, especially at this time of year when we are experiencing cold and damp?

We've all been to sites where the vinyl flooring is blistering and lifting. Or the joints are splitting, not due to poor welding for once, but because the adhesive has been degraded by moisture and has released the flooring, putting stress on the welded joint that it was never designed to cope with.

The client is usually blissfully unaware that there could be or ever was a moisture problem in his building.

He informs you that the old 'Marley tiles' which were removed so that the new vinyl sheet flooring could be installed were never any trouble, and is incredulous when you present him with a couple of goldfish from the first blister you split to prove your point.

It is a common story repeated thousands of times a year and is due to a number of factors.

Fast-track building practice, where insufficient time is available to allow subfloors to dry out adequately, is a constant concern to all manufacturers of contemporary floorcoverings; when a failure occurs it is often the floorcovering which is blamed – at least until the true cause can be proved.

In such a time-pressured situation, some flooring contractors may be 'bullied' into installing flooring using acrylic or pressure sensitive adhesives, which as a general rule have the moisture resistant properties of flour and water, onto subfloors which cannot be fully dry.

Old buildings without an integral DPM are also a common source of damp related problems, particularly when old flooring, such as tiles fixed in A TA (Asphalt Tile Adhesive), is lifted and a new sheet vinyl is laid.

Any moisture present in the subfloor or passing up from the

earth unhindered by the presence of a bit of 1200 gauge visqueen, no longer meets a barrier of a moisture repellent adhesive or the tiling itself. Rather than continuously permeating the old tiled floorcovering via the joints, it now builds up to a point where it can cause problems.

With the new floorcovering any such moisture will first hit a layer of adhesive which is at best moisture sensitive and not designed to deal with moisture levels in excess of 75% RH.

Furthermore, the plasticized sheet flooring which has replaced the semi rigid tiling is flexible and unstable when loose, resulting in rapid failure once the 'flour and water' have given up the ghost.

It doesn't have to be this way and often isn't. Anyone with a bit of common sense would test for moisture as a matter of course before proceeding with any flooring work onto a cementitious surface, even above ground level

on new build if it is found that the RH level is 75% or above.

Any sensible person would take steps to avoid the situation where everybody looks to you as the expert for a solution once the job has gone wrong, often at your expense.

Should you find that the subfloor is too damp to proceed with a flooring installation, the obvious and cheapest answer is to let it dry either naturally or speed up the process with dehumidifiers. If this is not an option due to time constraints, the application of a surface DPM is the logical conclusion.

Moisture really is the biggest single cause of failure in contemporary flooring installations – don't let one of your jobs add to the total. **CFJ**

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