



Martin Cummins on developments in floor preparation

Solvents: Can we manage without them?

AM I paying for my solvent or is it 'solvent free'? This rather flippant comment was asked of me in a recent training programme. A somewhat energetic discussion ensued and prompted this article.

Over the last 10 years or so there has been a consistent drive to reduce the levels of solvents in products being used by the general public, and rightly so.

This drive for the professional has been less clear. Until legislation demands otherwise, then we, as manufacturers, need to supply products that will primarily do a 'job'.

Why the different statements regarding products being solvent-free, low VOC (Volatile Organic Components), ultra low VOC, Emission Code, EC1, etc?

I am not going to discuss the definitions (always a tedious topic best left for committees) behind these terms in any depth but will explore the background behind their appearance and where and when they may be important.

Suffice to say the terms refer to products without solvent and in many cases, using raw materials that have been cleaned up by the suppliers to strip them of any contaminants and undesirable components.

■ **Changing:** First of all, you have probably used and still do use solvent-based products. Generally the contact adhesives used in flooring are solvent based.

Why is this? Simple answer, they fit in with our working practices, our site conditions (don't get me started on that one) and fit the performance requirements we need. Provided you carry out the relevant risk and COSHH assessments and provided there are no imposed site restrictions, then you can use whatever products you deem best for the job.

Notice the requirements for storing product and disposal of product. Regulation within these fields needs to be followed at all times. A typical product choice will undoubtedly include the market leading carpet adhesive, which contains a small amount of solvent.

Similarly, many water based products contain a 'small level of

solvent'. This can often be key to attaining the characteristics required – such as early grab, cold temperature performance and wetting out of the coverings.

Take away the solvent and the performance will not be the same. If moving to totally solvent free products you may need to change your method of use, your site conditions maybe much more critical and furthermore your costs maybe higher.

Ask again – why all these terms and claims regarding solvents?

Reducing the effect on the environment is of obvious importance not only to flooring contractors but also to manufacturers.

Manufacturing using solvent requires licenses, inspections, special storage facilities and manufacturing areas need to be isolated if solvents are used. If there weren't any technical or financial benefits we would not want to manufacture solvent containing products.

The effect upon the environment is an extensive topic – again justice cannot be given to this issue in such an article, suffice to say, reduce need for oil and associated solvent feedstocks, reduce emissions and reduce contaminated waste.

The agenda which has been instrumental in the move towards low VOC has been the indoor air quality agenda. The emissions associated with VOC's have been linked to what was for a short while a media topic called Sick Building Syndrome.

The claim was that people in new buildings were unwell as a consequence of the initial and continual release of VOCs. Removal of these would remove the problem – so the claim goes.

Hence paint manufacturers (typically very high in VOC) began introducing low VOC paints and, as is typical in the present climate, pressure for all involved to create minimal VOC was created.

In truth, though most flooring subfloor preparation products are very low in VOC or lose most of their VOC in the application and curing stages. Their contribution to the indoor air quality is relatively low compared to other

materials used in construction.

However, some architects and main contractors may still put restrictions on what products may be used and as a consequence you may need to look at products outside your normal portfolio.

When this is the case we would advise you assess the products, in conjunction with the manufacturers, and find out how they really will perform in our, often not very good, site conditions.

Don't think because they are suitable for the specified floorcovering that they will handle in the same manner. Many of the range of solvent free and low VOC products are technically very good, in controlled environments but unfortunately you, as a flooring contractor in the UK, do not often get such conditions.

Solvent-free, low VOC, ultra low VOC, Emission Code, EC1 – what do they mean to you?

Different levels of 'purity' of

product with cleaner raw materials but NOT necessarily designed specifically for the UK contractor.

Unless legislation or site specific requirements are in place you can carry on using your trusted products as long as you carry out all the relevant risk and COSHH assessments.

As time moves on I am sure all manufacturers will wish to move (or be forced to move) to formulations with as little solvent as possible.

So the risk of ignition and fire due to your smoking will no longer be there – but the government has already taken care of this problem by the ban on smoking anyway!

In answer to that flippant question in our training – the solvent is free, you just pay for all the other bits'. **CFJ**

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David Gatfield on training

Why manufacturers value skilled fitters

APART from me, who remembers the 'good old days' when if you had a problem with flooring material, or accessories for that matter, you more or less had to sort it out for yourself. If you had an issue with supply, quality of material, specification etc, you as the flooring contractor were on your own in the majority of cases.

What a difference a few decades make, not to mention some stiff competition.

Today manufacturers strive to deliver not just first rate products which is a given, but more importantly, first rate service too which is arguably harder to achieve as it is subjective, but at least it gives us all something to aim at.

These days, when you have a problem and ring the manufacturer, it would be a very short sighted company indeed that would not pull out all the stops to help you resolve it.

Today, we are called 'technical

services' and several of the original members, myself included, are still here; older but a whole lot wiser. Although the roll has grown out of all recognition, our core aim has not changed – it is still to help with flooring problems wherever possible, with whatever might arise.

In this column, I often mention our two sources of technical information and support available for flooring contractors. Firstly, the technical hotline is a telephone helpline for contractors staffed by personnel with years of practical flooring experience, offering sound advice to solve queries regarding our products.

Secondly, our contractor training school offers practical training sessions for contractors run by highly skilled ex-fitters, either based at the state-of-the-art facility at our head office in Letchworth, or through a programme of less formal,

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