

LET'S WORK SMARTER, NOT LONGER!

Is your company financially secure? As trading conditions appear to worsen more people, including many in the flooring industry, worry about business and employment prospects. With every piece of bad economic news, bosses look at ways of cutting back, striving to survive the recession. Redundancies are often their first thought. And those still in jobs are often expected to work for longer hours. But does that really make good business sense?

Recently released official figures are alarming. In the first quarter of 2008 a total of 3.3m people across the UK were working more than 48 hours a week, an additional 180,000 on the previous quarter. Nearly 5m Britons put in an average of over seven hours of unpaid overtime every week.

By coincidence the European Working Time Directive which imposed the 48 hour week is currently under review. Indeed, it's exactly 10 years since this directive came into operation. In October 1998 the economy was growing strongly, but the then prime minister Tony Blair – remember him – negotiated the British opt out, after bowing to business leaders who were kicking up merry hell about the measure.

They claimed the EU was trying to dictate to them how to run their companies. Furthermore, the directive would harm British business, they said. Ten years on, the rest of Europe has comfortably settled into the 48 hour week, but the UK still demands an opt out. And when the revised Working Time Directive takes effect next year Britain is likely to get its way.

The question that business leaders fail to dwell on is: Why

does the UK have notoriously low productivity rates when we work longer hours than any of our biggest competitors? For example, workers in Britain produce as much as 20% less than those in the US, France and Germany in the same time.

The trade unions warn that working long hours is actually bad for productivity as well as work-life balance, safety and health. The TUC slogan is to 'work smarter, not longer!'

There are various ways to improve business performance without demanding staff overtime. None of these methods is rocket science. Unfortunately, most of them need investment, not a popular strategy in the middle of an economic downturn. But what managers don't appear to appreciate is that this investment is virtually guaranteed to give excellent returns.

In the flooring industry the best way to boost productivity is by training, what this publication has banged on about for years. Few are keen to do it, yet there are many benefits, such as less wasted materials and time, not having to go back to put things right, fewer complaints, more satisfied customers and improved employee retention and morale. Can you honestly afford **not** to train your staff?



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For starters

Something I overheard at the National Floor Show, Harrogate: 'Did you see that man who has just walked off our stand? He is our best

customer and also very unusual. It's not that he places the biggest orders, but he never demands excessive discounts.'

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