

A Quick Look at the Construction Industry

By Angelo Xuereb, President, Federation of Building and Civil Engineering Contractors (FOBC)

The Federation of Building and Civil Engineering Contractors (FOBC), which is an affiliate association within the Malta Federation of Industry (FOI), works continuously to improve many aspects inherent to the Construction Industry in Malta. The list is never-ending... from Health and Safety considerations to registration of contractors, from the shortage of labour to the size of stone...

Health and Safety

One of the acute problems in the construction industry is the reluctance of workers to accept and adopt health and safety measures and procedures. This actually entails changing a mentality and a culture, and cannot be achieved overnight.

What has FOBC done in this regard? FOBC has had many meetings with the Occupational Health and Safety Authority (OHSA). The Authority has been sending its officers on construction sites to inform the workers on the working practices in order to be able to educate them by means of videos and other aids after they observe them at work.

One of the major stumbling blocks facing FOBC in its endeavours is the limitation it encounters when trying to communicate with local building contractors. It is somewhat of an impossible task to reach all contractors through educational and information campaigns. This situation results from the fact that many of the smaller contractors are not affiliated with any of the local representative organisations such as FOBC and the Malta Federation of Industry (FOI).

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Registration & Classification of Contractors

It is no secret that FOBC has been harping time and again for the introduction of a registration of all local contractors, large and small. And not only that, there should also be a Classification of contractors. Just like in the Hospitality Industry we have 3-star, 4-star and 5-star categories, we are in dire need of a classification in the construction sector. Each employer will then be able to choose the category of contractor and can expect the service given to be at a level in line with the level of rates paid.

Malta has been lagging behind in this regard. While a street-vendor requires a licence before he can trade, a building contractor requires no licence to operate! At times the magnitude of the responsibility of contractors seems to be forgotten!

Shortage of Labour

The severe shortage of labour supply in various construction trades, especially formwork erectors, is taking its toll on the Industry. These are indispensable on new building systems using concrete, which have taken over the construction industry in a relatively short time. The prevailing situation is attributable to the fact that the hardship traditionally associated with the construction industry is not attractive to our youths, even though the industry has come a long way in terms of new technologies and methods.

FOBC, the Building Industry Consultative Council (BICC), the Employment and Training Corporation (ETC), and the Malta College of Arts, Science & Technology (MCAST) are all doing their part to train locals in skills for certain construction trades where manpower is in short supply.

However the results of these efforts are still not sufficient to fill the lacuna in the various trades and it is evident that the short-term solution is to import the required manpower from abroad. These organisations are also investigating the possibility of bringing over foreign trainers to train local trainers.

These initiatives, together with other improvements in the Construction Industry such as issues relating to the size of stone and standardisation, should help alleviate the shortage problem in the medium term.

Size of Stone

The size of local building stone is one of the main culprits discouraging youths from working in the Construction Industry. The heavy "building" stone is very laborious and it is therefore necessary to decrease the size of the stone, and consequently also of its weight, thereby making it more manageable and more acceptable to the builders.

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Standardisation

The need to have standardised and uniform products supplied by trades associated with the Construction Industry has long been felt. This is especially so in the case of doors and windows which are usually supplied all different in size, even though these would be part of one uniform order for one project. This lack of standardisation inevitably results in a higher content of labour being

required, consequently pushing construction prices up.

Architects have an important role to play in rectifying this situation and should always design plans using standardised measurements.

FOBC Looks Ahead

In the present circumstances, FOBC is doing its part to improve the various aspects of the local Construction Industry including quality, health and safety, manpower, and care for the working environment of construction employees, and respect for the neighbouring environment.

There is a lot to be done and it cannot be done overnight. However, FOBC is convinced that if all the players involved pull one rope, then much will be achieved for the benefit of the local Construction Industry.

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