



Structured thinking

Angelo Xuereb

THE Federation of Building and Civil Engineering Contractors (FOBC), 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 done 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 to construction sites to inform workers about 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 is because many of the smaller contractors are not affiliated with any of the local representative organisations such as FOBC or the FOI.

Registration and classification of contractors

It is no secret that FOBC has been harping on about the need for the introduction of a registration of all local contractors, large and small. It also believes there should also be a classification of contractors. Just as in the hospitality industry there are three-star, four-star and five-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 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



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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 due to the hardship

traditionally associated with the construction industry, which 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, the Employment and Training Corporation, and the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology 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 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 building stone is very heavy. Reducing its size and consequently its weight, would make it more manageable and more acceptable to builders.

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, each of which is usually supplied in a different size, even when part of one uniform order for one project. This lack of standardisation inevitably results in a higher labour content 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 on one rope, then much will be achieved for the benefit of the local construction industry.

Mr Xuereb is a council member of the Malta Federation of Industry and president of the Federation of Building and Civil Engineering Contractors (FOBC), which is an affiliate association of the Malta Federation of Industry.

Forum on insurance for freight movers

A FORUM next week will address the issue of Standard Trading Conditions, which allow transport operators (forwarders, hauliers, ship owners) to limit their liability and defend claims for cargo loss and damage in certain circumstances.

"This type of limitation is fair because the transport operator traditionally only takes a small part of the profit from a trading venture, and should not be held fully liable when something goes wrong," the forum's main speaker Ian Hyslop said.

"Cargo owners should look to their cargo insurers – rather than the liability insurers of a transport operator – for full compensation if cargo is lost or damaged during transport," he said.

Mr Hyslop is the legal director of the Through Transport Club, better known as the TT Club. The TT Club is the leading provider of insurance and related risk management services to this sector. Established in 1968, the club's membership comprises ship operators, ports and terminals, road, rail and airfreight operators, logistics companies and container lessors.

The TT Club insures the liabilities of two of the largest forwarders in Malta, as well as the liabilities and handling equipment of the Freeport Terminal. It has also had a long relationship with United Insurance Brokers.

My Hyslop welcomed the setting up last year of the Malta International Forwarders

Association (MIFA), pointing out some of the challenges it must face.

"I am not an expert on this, but I think Malta lacked a national forwarding association. Most other western (and eastern) European countries have one. Malta has to consider its accession to the CMR Convention for International Carriage of Goods by Road, already ratified by most of western and eastern Europe, which includes limits and defences and with which any STCs would have to mesh," he said.

"The track record of national forwarding associations around Europe in influencing government departments, including customs, as well as providing advice and training, is generally good.

Clearly MIFA will seek to reach the same level."

The forum being organised by the MIFA will discuss current national and international trading terms and conditions, and their implications on the Maltese freight industry.

Entitled, Trading Terms and Conditions for the Maltese Freight Moving Industry – A Must, the forum is aimed at forwarders, bond operators, shipping agents, hauliers, insurers, insurance intermediaries and lawyers working in this field.

It will be held at the Victoria Hotel in Sliema on Monday, September 5 from 2 to 4.30 p.m. Pre-booking by today is advisable.