

The construction industry



by **Angelo Xuereb**

The construction industry in Malta is thriving well and continues to represent one of the most important sectors in the economy. However, it is an industry inundated with issues like health and safety, registration of contractors, labour shortage and standardisation, among others.

One of the acute problems in construction 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.

The Federation of Building and Civil Engineering Contractors (FOBC), in conjunction with the Occupational Health and Safety Authority (OHSA), has worked on these issues in the past, and the authority sends officers on construction sites to inform workers of safe working practices and educates them by means of videos and other aids after they observe them at work.



One of the federation's major stumbling blocks in its endeavours is the limitations it faces when trying to communicate with local building contractors. It is practically impossible to reach all contractors through educational and information campaigns.

This situation results from the fact that many of the smaller contractors are not affiliated to any of the local representative organisations, such as FOBC and the FOI.

REGISTRATION AND CLASSIFICATION OF CONTRACTORS

The FOBC has harped time and again about the need for registration of all local contractors. Contractors should also be classified. Just like in the hospitality industry we have three-, four- and five-star categories, the construction sector would also benefit. Employers will be able to choose the category of contractor and expect a service in line with the level of rates paid. Malta lags in this regard. While a street vendor requires a licence

to trade, a building contractor does not. The magnitude of responsibility of contractors seems to be forgotten at times.

SHORTAGE OF LABOUR

The construction industry is said to face a lack of human resources. The industry has also called upon the authorities to be able to use the services of foreign skilled labourers.

The impact of foreign skilled labour is causing further social problems. This is because when a foreigner is issued with a work permit, he is automatically entitled to bring his family over, thus creating social pressures. Furthermore, if a foreign worker is found inadequate or commits a criminal offence, it is difficult to deport him. The FOBC insists that if employment has been terminated by his employer, the worker would be obliged to leave the country. The severe shortage of labour supply in various construction trades, especially formwork erectors, is taking its toll on the industry.

Formwork erectors 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

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way in terms of new technologies and methods.

Unfortunately, due to the generally improved standard of living, we do not have any unemployed workers in the construction industry. The majority of those registering for social benefits are 'unemployable' and 'protected'.

The Federation, together with the Building Industry Consultative Council (BICC), the Employment and Training Corporation (ETC), and the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), is doing its part to train locals in those skills where manpower is in short supply.

But the results of these efforts are still insufficient 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. Bringing over foreign trainers to train local trainers could be a solution.

This initiative, together with other improvements in the construction industry, such as issues relating to the size of stone and standardisation, should help alleviate the problem in the medium term.

The federation notes that the University of Malta is not producing what the construction industry needs. Many students are graduating as architects and engineers. The industry needs qualified construction managers, project managers, site managers, quality managers, health and safety managers, and other middle management.

SIZE OF STONE

The size of local building stone is a major culprit that discourages youths from working in the construction industry. The heavy 'building' stone block (approximately 70 kg) is very laborious. It is therefore necessary to decrease the size of the stone and consequently its weight, thereby making it more manageable and more acceptable to the builders.

STANDARDISATION

The need for standardisation and for 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 that are usually supplied in different sizes, even though these would be part of one order for one project.

This lack of standardisation inevitably results in a higher content of labour required, consequently pushing construction prices up. Architects have an important role to play in rectifying this situation and should always design plans using standard measurements.

Mr Xuereb is president of the FOBC

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