**Seasonal shutdown, the answer to an annual dilemma?**

Summer 2022 may feel a long way off, but not for construction firms, many of whom are already looking ahead to staffing levels ahead of next year’s peak holiday period. A temporary shutdown could be the answer, says design and construction specialist Dan Grimshaw.

The past summer proved a challenging one for the construction industry with a shortage of workers due to post-lockdown holidays, loss of free movement, and supply chain hold-ups; and it is not clear to what extent these issues will be resolved any time soon.

One answer could be a national shutdown for two to three weeks each summer as practised by many our European neighbours where retailers, factories, and city offices temporarily close or operate with reduced business hours. By all accounts the tradition goes back to the days of Caesar Augustus in 27 BC when it is claimed the emperor wanted to combine several festivals into the month of August to give laborers an extended time off to rest and recover. To this day, in Spain many people are required to take a certain amount of their vacations in August with many companies shutting down for the entire month; likewise in Italy many factories close their doors with workers taking the month off and decamping to the seaside or mountains for the duration; and in Sweden factories shut down for a few weeks every summer for the Industrisemester, or industry holiday.

The idea of an extended summer holiday was once a characteristic of the UK manufacturing industry, particularly in the automotive and production-line based sectors – the reason incidentally behind the popularity of beach towns like Blackpool. The practice was common in the 50s and 60s with the so-called annual ‘factory fortnight’ – an enforced shutdown to give staff leave during the school holidays, and for scheduling maintenance tasks that would otherwise disrupt the company’s work time. Factories in towns like Northampton would close for two weeks every summer when local footwear factories and their supply chains would have a co-ordinated vacation. To this day, construction equipment manufacturer JCB, closes its Rocester factory in Staffordshire every year for two-and-a-half weeks in July in keeping with the tradition. The idea is if a firm temporarily shuts down when many people are on holiday then they are not operating with half a workforce, and everyone gets a break.

It could be argued that shutting up shop for the summer could mean a potential loss of business for other companies in the supply chain; and that the practice might hamper output and productivity which could risk allowing the UK to lose ground to its international competitors. However, one could argue the opposite, and that it could make the summer months more economically viable and attract more people to stay within the industry. A two-to-four-week shutdown in the construction industry, for instance, could lead to higher levels of engagement, increase morale, and be an attractive employee benefit. It would not affect the project programme and end date because it avoids the six-week period of 50 per cent staff reduction. Meanwhile, with global warming and many suppliers and main contacts located in climates with rising temperatures, manufacturing manpower may not be available due to extreme weather conditions anyway.

However, this could all be moot. With a long-term chronic labour shortage in the UK and a 42 per cent fall in EU construction labour over the past four years, unless there are enough workers to operate productively in the first place, such ideas will never even take off. Although the order books may be full, with wage costs rising, soaring vacancies, and sharp cost increases in both imported construction products and skilled labour, the sector needs to do more to develop and nurture the people who work for it, to take a well-earned summer break.

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