**The current supply chain crisis could spark a long-overdue change for construction**

For design and construction specialist Dan Grimshaw the current supply chain crisis could ultimately shape the construction industry of the future.

It feels a bit like the great toilet roll grab of 2020 at the moment with dwindling supplies and our builders’ merchant limiting us to one pallet of cement a day. True, the so-called ‘perfect storm’ of Brexit, Covid and the Suez blockage has left the British building industry in the midst of a supply chain crisis; prices are going through the roof and activity levels at a seven-year high. Yet, the present disruption, although tough to take, could ultimately hasten a long-overdue modernisation of the sector and deliver a fundamentally different ‘new normal’. It could lead to a visible shift to a more-considered, more-productive, more-planned way of working in the next five to 10 years.

If we look at the current dominance of next-day delivery options, we need to ask ourselves whether it is the most efficient and sustainable way of doing things. Where once you would sit down and set a bill of quantities that would tell you the exact amounts required to complete a project, now no-one really needs to. It is all lagging metrics rather than leading metrics. Suppliers have little idea what is coming down the line, because nobody is looking forward enough; they are just looking back at what they sold last week and the week before and basing the next week’s orders on that. For the industry to adapt and flourish, we need to co-ordinate information across the supply chain and embrace the use of new digital technologies, such as product configurators or cloud manufacturing.

Employing a more vigorous project management process could also lead to a reappraisal of geographic links and vulnerabilities. Each sector of materials has its own story, but all of those stories are interconnected by Covid and Brexit. Hitherto builders and contractors have had little idea where their materials came from because they had no need to ask about the breakdown and traceability of products. But since leaving Europe and the start of the pandemic, we are more tuned into how and why a supply chain might be affected. There is an appreciation of where materials are coming from and the challenges of procuring and transporting them. All the architects, builders and engineers I know are having to adjust to new lead times on everything. From being dependent on next-day-delivery options and doing things in bits and bobs, adapting to the new changes will ultimately make the sector more productive. Ordering 10 bags of cement for tomorrow and then and then 50 in the next day or when you need it, is not necessarily the most efficient way of doing things. Thinking and planning ahead a bit more is no bad thing. And from a sustainability point of view, the harder it is to get hold of something, the more valuable it becomes. Scarcity increases value, and in turn you attach more value to it. There is no effort required when with just the click of a mouse there is an abundance that just falls on your doorstep.

The future may see the decline of just-in-time-style procurement and the increasing importance of project management. This will also require training. The eastern European wave has served us extremely well and will continue to do so, but it is obviously a fragile situation. Most are on zero-hour contracts or self-employed by choice and are often likely to take off for five weeks when August comes around to see their families. For the sector to prosper, we urgently need to develop and nurture the people that work for us. We need more home-grown permanent staff and to build teams and keep them, rather than just drafting people in. The key to a dynamic future lies in training, on-boarding and recruiting people into the sector from an early age and who have an energetic outlook to their prospects and their career.

Without doubt the industry has a daunting task ahead of it that will require bold and agile moves and deft navigation, but the size of the prize is enormous.

**ENDS**

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