



TALKING TIMBER

WOOD SCIENCE – WHY DOES IT MATTER?

*A timber trade staffed across the board with knowledgeable wood professionals is something the whole industry should aspire too, says Wood Technology Society chairman **John Park***



Are you one of those people (or companies) quite happy to sell wood, but who find that some in the trade you encounter just have no idea how it works?

Take a moment to imagine what might be achieved by a timber trade staffed throughout by knowledgeable wood professionals?

That 'specialist' attitude, I am glad to say, is finding favour with some companies. Here staff training is slowly becoming 'de

rigueur' once more – vital if you want to get on be successful, fashionable, even, popular and socially acceptable! And wood wasn't for a while, remember? Perhaps we should aspire to being more successful and inspirational, with architects specifying more wood, inspired by a new wave of trade specialists!

INSPIRATIONAL LEARNING

An interesting and instructive bit of information at the tenth (biennial) International Conference on Wood Science and Engineering in November 2015 in Brasov, Romania, came from the findings of a survey of industrialists and their needs regarding the competencies of graduates.

From the list of 21 identified competencies, at the top is 'orientation towards quality'. I can't fault anyone for having that as a number-one priority and although it doesn't mention wood by name it does highlight the need for one particular aspect of specialist wood knowledge – a sound understanding of grading and we all know, hopefully, why that is essential!

Wood is actually not mentioned by name until number 10, with 'knowledge in wood's technological properties'. Numbers two to nine relate in the main to personal competencies.

But what about those all-important people in the lives of any timber trader? Yes, the customers! In at number four is 'meeting their requirements' and at number nine, 'solving their problems'.

And although wood only makes it in at number ten, at least it comes with a 'keep up the good work', because without that 'knowledge in wood's technological properties' how can anyone talk knowledgeably to a customer, either to meet their requirements or, more importantly, to solve their problems?

So how deep should that knowledge go? Languishing between number 15, 'abilities for interior design', and number 17, 'abilities to work on machine tools for furniture processing', is 'knowledge in wood's physico-chemical characteristics' – follow-up action – 'low priority'! Thinking about that for just a moment – how and by how much do the physico-chemical characteristics of wood influence its performance in the short- and long-term?

John Park – Wood Technology Society chairman and manager of Canada Wood UK

And who is this 'customer' anyway? The larger the volume of lower value commodity product the more 'remote' is the customer, which is a bit of a blow, as commodity softwood accounts for quite a large proportion of UK timber trade involvement. And as it is re-engaging the timber trade with The Wood Technology Society that I am endeavouring to do during my three years as chairman, am I on a hiding to nothing? It would not be the first time that someone within the trade has made such a suggestion!

But it remains in the interests of the whole trade to have all the information and data it needs at its fingertips. And there are still plenty of critical decision makers, customers and specifiers, who can be reached direct and influenced by knowledge delivered with confidence.

So how does the confidence and influence take root but through training and education? These are life-long commodities and, in the professions, formalised with continuing professional development.

The WTS addresses all age-groups recognising the need for the next generations of wood industry specialists and those specifying professionals known as customers. So, if you are approached by one of our students for support at a regional show or careers event, take a moment. Even if the potential futures of students are of no immediate interest, well, you just never know who their parents might be. ■

Below: Architects are specifying more wood than ever before

