

The pandemic was tough for everyone but the dangers it posed are being overcome, says the sales director of Loughton Contracts. However, when it comes to the lack of young floorlayers, he worries the flooring industry is running out of time

By ADAM BERNSTEIN

Nick Perkins: The clock is ticking on skilled labour'



I. A BUMPY RIDE



THAT Covid-19 happened is a given. And while the trade stuttered somewhat, Loughton Contract's sales director Nick Perkins says

2020 wasn't a bad year in the end, given the circumstances, and that 2021 is shaping up to be a bumper year. But the pandemic has had an impact. 'Back in January 2020 our secured order book was very strong, and the pipeline of work was just the same. But Covid-19 hit and everyone's lives were turned upside-down. Nobody knew what to expect. Despite everything slowing down enormously at the end of Q2, the industry picked itself back up. We were fortunate to see our customers put the required safety measures in place, allowing us to return to site.'

He says, however, it's by no means been an easy journey - especially for Loughton's project managers and installation teams 'on the coalface... to whom we're extremely grateful!

Fortunately, since then, orders have increased month-on-month and Nick says it's now returned to the levels the company was experiencing at the end of 2019

And looking back, he's able to pinpoint 'a steady increase in turnover over the past five or six years; I would put that down to the capabilities we have in the business to complete a wide range of facets of flooring, alongside the high standard of customer service that we give'.

He, again, recognises that the company's employees are its biggest asset, 'whether it's the warehouse staff, the ladies in finance or the project managers... we have a great team which strives for the same thing when it comes 'The larger scale office fitouts we'd been tracking continued to plough on and it's been refreshing to see us secure several of them in the past three months'

to getting the projects delivered. Nevertheless, Nick says the last year meant some tough decisions had to be made for the long-term benefit of the company.

There were a small number of projects we'd secured pre-Covid-19 that were

shelved, and a few were cancelled. But thankfully, we've started to see those projects come back online which is very welcome news. The fitout sector was one where we saw a marked decline in projects, purely because everyone was working at home and there was effectively no need to have an office during that period. That said, the larger scale office fitouts we'd been tracking continued to plough on and it's been refreshing to see us secure several of them in the past three months:

On residential, 'the pipeline remains strong' as Nick says it has done throughout the past 12 months. And for the public sector work, it continues to be a focus for Loughton. All in all, Nick thinks Loughton is 'in a great place for continuing the good progress we've achieved over the past few years'.

Alongside Covid-19 as a threat to business is Brexit. However, Nick seems unphased by it as the firm hasn't been massively affected by it. He says, though, 'there were a few hiccups towards the end of the year and at the start of 2021, but nothing that was an absolute showstopper. We're starting to see price increases in certain areas - mainly relating to freight costs as they're currently going through the roof. Timber is also becoming a big issue, rates are fluctuating daily and products such as plywood and chipboard are in short supply, which is causing a real headache at times'

So far, his labour resources have held up, but he's aware the construction industry relies on foreign workers, and he's hopeful they stay although 'there've been a few we know that have taken the decision to leave which is a real shame. We are having to adapt to a much tighter labour market, we've invested in additional staff to manage that department whilst making changes to our office layout to



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Brexit, so far, hasn't had any effect on projects going ahead and he doesn't anticipate that changing.

Overall, Nick is of the view that the sector is very buoyant at present and that construction, as a whole, has been very fortunate to not have been affected as adversely as other sectors throughout the pandemic despite labour and material shortages eroding margins on a daily basis.

And it helps that Loughton focuses on the sectors that it performs well in. Also, as he points out, 'developers are still keen to press on with residential schemes and large corporates are still requiring office space in the city, I can't see that slowing down anytime soon'.

While homeworking was necessary over the past 12 months, he doesn't see it becoming the norm... he sees, long-term, a blend of homeworking and the office going forward – he emphasises that 'our business thrives on the collaborative interactions between staff members when they're in one another's company – you don't get the same outcomes working via Microsoft Teams.'

II. NO JOB TOO SMALL

OUGHTON Contracts is one of the largest flooring firms in the country. While Nick says he spends no time at all worrying about the competition – he knows who they are. This means Loughton is very aware of who it's pricing against whenever tendering a project.

He says 'there's a real mixed bag of contractors, and we've been able to adapt our services and pricing style to be able to compete with them'.

In terms of rivals, they vary from sectorto-sector: 'We don't have dealings with them directly, but we all know the same people so it can lead to some friendly banter when we bump into each other at supplier events.'

He says it's all done in good taste and all tongue-in-cheek — 'the flooring industry has some real characters, and it's great to be part of it'.

No business can exist without promoting itself. On this, Nick comments that Loughton works on several planes to increase the exposure of the company and generate potential revenue. That said, he cautions that 'the best form of marketing is the reputation that you build within the industry and the standard of the work that you produce'.

He says the company has worked very hard to build what it has today, and this in turn, 'has given us the reputation of the UK's number one flooring contractor, which therefore gives us the most effective form of marketing: word-of-mouth'

But other than that, the company is active on most forms of social media. 'On LinkedIn,' says Nick, 'we currently have nearly 3,000 followers... among many major players in the construction industry. We also post daily on Instagram and Twitter, with a combined following of nearly 17,000.'

The content varies and promotes finished projects, but Nick says it also covers detail on charity work, environmental procedures, accreditations, staff and any national awareness days or initiatives.

In terms of the company website, Nick says it was redesigned just over a year ago and features the standard fare in company information: 'You can meet the team, see a range of our fitout, residential, leisure and education/ healthcare projects, who we work with, a summary of our social media activity, find out all the latest news on our news and blogs section and of course, contact us.'

We're constantly looking at the trends of our social media coverage and analyse the data and see where we can improve!

So, what is a typical customer and job for Loughton Contracts? In answer, Nick says no job is too small: 'We could be working on a carpet tile installation of say 100sq m one day, then a high-end residential project covering 60,000sq m the next - the range of projects we cover is pretty large. If I was looking to pinpoint it though, I'd say we specialise in larger scale fitout and residential projects within the construction market.'





HOGAN LOVELLS

Loughton Contracts was appointed by ISG, to supply and install all floorcoverings to the UK headquarters of Hogan Lovells, an American-British law firm, located in Holborn, London



The company has a large end-user client base as well as well as an aftercare business, Loughton Direct, so as Nick says, 'we tend to have most sectors covered'

One thing he's keen to highlight is that the client-base hasn't changed for a very long time and the main reason for this, he says, is customer service: 'If one of our regular customers came to us with a small project, we wouldn't hesitate in saying 'yes' to assist them. We're very well structured and can generally turn our hand to most requirements!

III. MONEY SENSE

ASH is the lifeblood of any business, especially so for one the size of Loughton Contracts. On this Nick says his finance and commercial team 'are amazing' and work 'to ensure we're paying our suppliers on time and chase our own debts when due'.

Part of this means being selective as to who the company works for; all new customers are subject to credit checks something Nick says 'works both ways and is no different when we approach new suppliers'.

All this makes perfect sense when put into context for Loughton could be working on anything between 40-50 projects at any one time. As Nick says, keeping track of that level of business is no mean feat'.

Turning briefly to retentions, Nick says they're a problem for the industry and 'it's something we have a firm focus on recovering... at the end of the day it's the profit sitting there in someone else's bank account'

While he understands why they're in place, he'd prefer retentions gone: 'I think if you asked any contractor in our position, they'd prefer that they were abolished and replaced with some other

'We have a firm focus on retentions... at the end of the day it's the profit sitting there in someone else's bank account'

mechanism; it's not right that we should have to wait longer for payment than the agreed period because other trades haven't completed their own defects'.

With a firm the size of Loughton it's no wonder Nick finds it hard to pick out jobs he's been particularly pleased to seal, or which stand out as unique or special. However, one that springs to mind was the fitout of Amazon's London head quarters.

'It was a project we felt we may struggle to win, and it got to a point where my managing director almost had me stand down and let it go. That's not really in my nature so I put my case across to him as to why I thought we could win it and went after it like a dog with a bone. It was a bit of a fight, but in the end, we secured it and what a job it turned out to be.'

In detail, the project was a mixture of carpet tiles, timber, woven vinyl and rubber and totalled over 39,000sq m of office space. In terms of the residential side of the business, Nick cites the redevelopment of Battersea Power Station as 'an amazing project to be part

He says Loughton has been on site since 2015 and by the time phase three is completed this year, the company will have installed more than 110,000sg m of cradle and batten system with timber

It makes sense at this juncture, to

pose the question of how Loughton Contracts chooses suppliers to work with. In response. Nick says most are named within the specifications the company is given to price - 'but we do have several suppliers we work closely with:

He states the obvious, that price is always something he has to consider. But he goes further: 'There's no doubt relationships are also key, people buy from people and that's something I've always believed in. If you have a good relationship with a certain person or supplier, they're naturally going to be at the forefront of your mind when you're looking to specify a product'

He adds that Loughton wants to engage with suppliers 'that have an evolving product range, have good sustainability credentials and are forward thinking in the way that they do business. Loughton doesn't expect something for nothing, so business needs to be reciprocal wherever possible - suppliers do need to work hard to win our business but we need to work hard to win their trust and keep the relationship on track!

IV. STARTING YOUNG

ICK has been in flooring since he was 16. With nigh on 24 years under his belt he tells how, despite his longevity, it wasn't a career he proactively sought out. Instead, as the story goes, he'd always done quite well at

I was never in trouble and did well with my GCSEs. But the defining moment came when I was about to start on A Levels. While I was progressing well in two of the subjects, it became apparent the third wasn't something I was going to excel at. After a bit of debating with my parents, I was faced with the choice of staying at school and getting my head down or looking for a job pretty sharpish >>













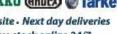












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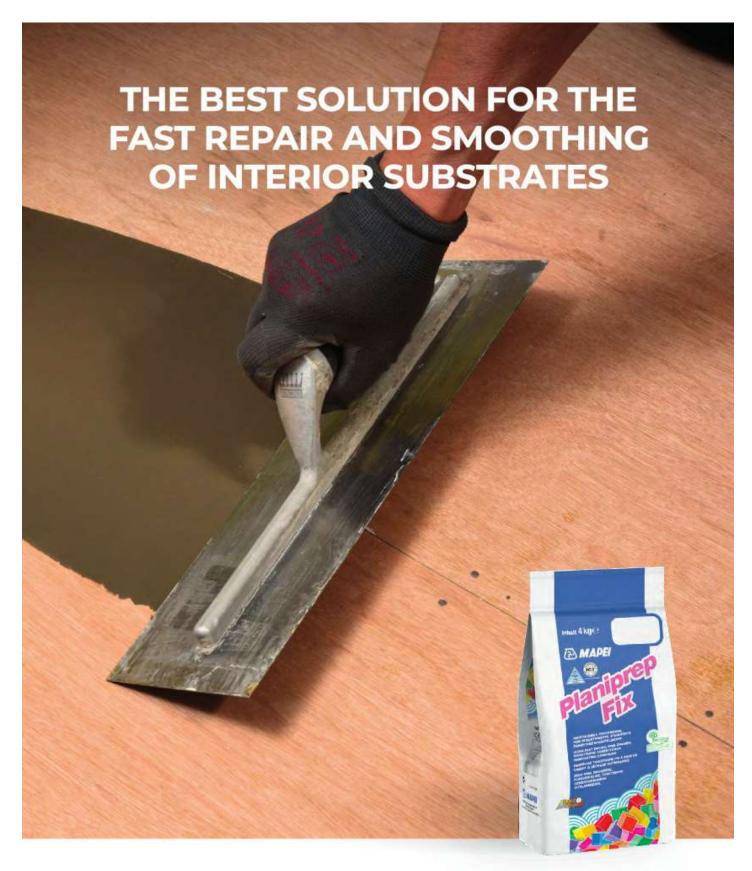
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- my mum wouldn't have let me leave school without a job.'

The net result was a visit to a careers centre to search through adverts. 'One caught my eye, an office junior for a local carpet company. I liked the idea of working in an office, I also thought the salary of £100 per week was the minimum I was worth at that point in my life'

The company Nick joined was a small contract flooring business with a retail shop at the front of the premises and a small warehouse - 'more like a barn' as he described it - at the rear. The job meant working in the office with the office manager while helping customers in the shop whenever they came in. Fortuitously, Nick says the owner thought it would be good for him to get out onto site one day a week 'so I could see what went on and learn on the job... to be honest, that experience was invaluable, and I still draw

He stayed at the firm for 17 years 'as it was a small tightknit group... a very family-orientated business'.

But his role changed as the company grew. When Nick started, the business was a small contractor that turned over £750,000 with massive potential to grow. And that's exactly what happened he says. But the workload increased as did the projects: I started to get involved with the contract side of the business and that's when I really got hooked. I enjoyed the banter with the floorlayers; being an office boy I was always getting stick when I went out onsite, but I quite enjoyed getting my hands dirty!

As for the office work, Nick says he started assisting with marking up drawings with the correct finishes, carrying out the take-offs to compile the measures and this led to me learning how to price projects, which was the part of the job I really enjoyed!





CAREY STREET

Loughton Contracts was appointed by Multiplex in June 2020 to supply and install floorcoverings to the major luxury residential building, Lincoln Square, located at 48 Carey Street

Understandably, he says winning work was a great feeling: 'I always remember the first large project I secured off my own back, a large school in Stevenage. I still enjoy that feeling today; there's nothing better than giving a tender your all and finding out you've secured the project!

In time, the company increased in size and moved to an industrial unit nearby. It changed to concentrate on contract flooring rather than domestic

installations. He adds that there was an unpleasant experience when a family member started his own company while still employed. It eventually led to that individual leaving.

But that, Nick says, was when he was elevated in the business: 'My managing director needed everyone to pull together and steady the ship - which is exactly what we did. And I was made a director of the company in 2005, aged 24.

More time passed and the company »











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grew further which led to another move to different premises. But, as Nick points out, the market was relatively tight, the premises were particularly large 'and the company was finding the financial strain of this quite tough!

With the market remaining volatile, Nick and the other directors were under enormous pressure to try and keep things steady

With this scene set, it's not hard to see why Nick's health took a turn for the worse. 'One Tuesday afternoon I didn't feel great - my coffee wouldn't stay in my mouth when I drank it, my colleague thought I'd had a stroke but thankfully it wasn't... it was Bell's Palsy and was directly related to the stress of my job."

On a positive note, he adds that he's 'fit and well, so it isn't all bad'. A week after his incident, Nick took a call from a good friend. It would change his life - at least professionally.

V. FINDING LOUGHTON

ICK was back at work when the call came through. 'I actually went straight from hospital back to my desk that day, which was stupid now I think about it.

He explained what had happened to his friend, who, after ringing off called back shortly after and said he was going to get a call from Lee Smyth at Loughton Contracts. They were looking for a sales manager and she had put him forward for the position - albeit without asking Nick.

But as he continues: "I'm a very loyal person and the thought of (leaving my employer) filled me with dread - but I always saw Loughton as the best in the industry. The company worked on the best projects, had a really good corporate image, it came across as very professional and the thought of being part of that really excited me!

He spoke to Lee and explained that he wasn't in the best shape 'given that half of my face was drooping on one side, but if he was happy to meet for a coffee, I'd nip down to Essex to see him. Nick went and was greeted by Lee and his brother Paul. 'To be honest I didn't know what to expect as I had heard so many stories about Loughton over the years!

And it appears, as Nick says, they couldn't have been nicer: 'They made me feel so comfortable, given the circumstances, and explained to me what they were looking for and a bit about the business and how it was structured

following the management buyout."

He adds that he had an enjoyable 30 minutes with them just chatting about flooring - he felt that he had nothing to lose by meeting them and it turned out to be the best decision he could've made. He received an offer of employment by the end of the day.

'It was totally unexpected, but opportunities like that don't come around very often. The fact they were so friendly and welcoming towards me made me certain I should accept the offer.

Of course, 17 years is a long time to spend with one employer and he doesn't regret staying that long as it gave him a 'wealth of knowledge and experience and I'm really thankful for my time there, it was a shame the way it has ended as I thought a lot of the owner' But it was time to move on.

The move to Loughton seems to have worked out well for within three months Nick was appointed sales director. He reckons this was because he 'was very focused on giving everything to the job!

As he explains, he was used to doing a bit of everything previously - tendering, winning work, placing orders, surveying, project managing, and so on. But he says Loughton was very different. 'It's >>>





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structured so well that that wasn't necessary, and it allowed me to concentrate on the part of the job that I enjoyed the most, which was winning work."

Nick is now one of six board members, and he thinks it a great place to be. 'I love coming to work every day, I love my job and I honestly believe I work for the best flooring company in the UK. We have a great team and I enjoy working with the other five members of the executive team'

Interestingly, he notes they're all different 'and that's not a bad thing - we all have our own strengths, and we get on really well'.

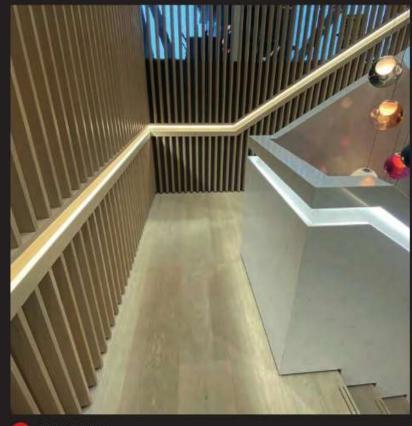
He described the board as 'a very focused bunch and it's really comforting to know we all have one goal and are pulling in the same direction'.

Of course, they each have their day jobs to fulfil, but the board meets at least twice a week to discuss the pressing issues in detail.

'As you can imagine, there's a lot that goes in to managing the company, it's a huge beast and takes a lot of effort from the entire workforce to keep things on track.' That said, he still gets a buzz from hearing that a colleague has secured a project that they've been working on for months, or that one of the younger team members has picked up their first order. It's all about the team ethic and 'that's what makes us so successful at what we

VI. TICK TOCK...

UNNING a business isn't easy and so there's the question of how to maintain a good work/life balance. For someone like Nick it's never easy - no doubt because, as he says: 'I've always been guite focused and driven with my career."



Loughton Contracts was appointed by Overbury to supply and install floorcoverings to the offices of a private equity firm in Paddington. This office space is in a 243,200sq ft development, The Brunel Building

He says he likes to start early and if he needs to, will work late. But he has a family to think of and it can be tough to manage at times. Fortunately, it was made very clear to him when he started at Loughton that family is important and if he ever felt work was taking over his private life, he'd be expected to put his hand up and ask for help. That, he says, wasn't something he'd experienced for a very long time, and 'it was a breath of

Beyond that, Nick notes that at

Loughton 'there's always someone willing to lend a hand if you're struggling. Covid-19 has also been a real lesson to us all in managing our workloads while effectively 'living at work' - trying to do our day jobs while coping with home schooling has been a struggle at times but I'm thankful to have two fantastic managing directors who are very aware of what everyone is going through.

It's quite clear from the comments given during this interview that Nick loves the industry and the company he works for - >>



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'Laying floors can take years of training while working on construction sites in all sorts of conditions - not always an attractive prospect to young people'

he reiterates he's 'fortunate that I enjoy my job and I couldn't ever see myself working within another sector.

In terms of the industry Nick thinks the sector in a pretty good place: 'There are plenty of companies we come up against on a regular basis who are capable of delivering good work!

He worries, though, that getting enough young people into the trade is always a concern as there just doesn't seem to be the numbers coming through, especially on the installation side of things.

And time is against the sector he adds. 'Laying floors isn't an easy job, it can take years of training while working on



HOGAN LOVELLS

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construction sites in all sorts of conditions and that isn't always the most attractive prospect to the younger generation."

However, Loughton has been fortunate to have taken on some good young people recently and he says they've been receptive to the apportunity they've been given. Loughton, he says, is a big believer in providing them with the right

level of training - there are several of them undertaking NVQs and degree level qualifications (himself included).

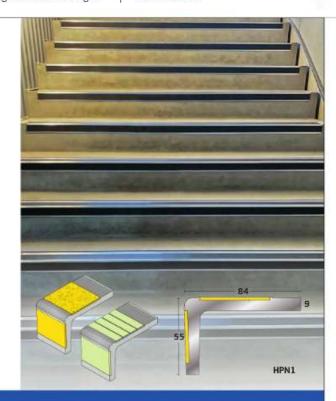
'Fundamentally,' says Nick, 'you get out of people what you put into them, and if you give them the time they need and the right tools to do the job well then good results should follow:

Amen to that.



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