

By Mark Humphreys

Short training courses have long been a bone of contention in the industry – but it is the quality, not the quantity, of courses which produces top-quality tilers, says managing director of Specialist Training Courses (STC), Mark Humphreys.

Time well spent

I remember sitting in the board meeting of a trade association a few years ago and witnessing a time-served professional break down and cry because short trade courses in ceramic tiling were destroying the industry by churning out sub-standard tradesmen who think they are professional after two or four weeks of tuition. My company, STC, is one of the companies that specialises in these type of short courses – and, to be honest, I couldn't agree with him more!

The gentleman in question was absolutely correct about the standards, but totally incorrect about the length of the course being the problem. When these pioneering courses started in earnest back in 2005, there were only three private training companies of any note that delivered ceramic tiling training.

Five years on, and there are now over 40 training centres that all claim to be unique.

But the problem lies in the quality of the delivery, not the length of course. It's high time that this industry was regulated to cut out these so-called training companies who prey on people's need to retrain, creating false hopes and giving false promises.

Even the Government needs to wake up and smell the coffee – which is actually funding some of these rogue courses and, by association, giving them credence.

However, trade bodies, like the Training Alliance, are doing a sterling job to control the private training free-for-all by operating an invitation-only membership purely for companies that meet its quality standards.

The Training Alliance charges a minimal admin fee of £100 annually, and can offer incredible discounts as a buying group, also providing support throughout its network connections – but only to those who are accepted. If you do not fit its criteria, you will not get in – you cannot simply pay to become a member.

The Training Alliance exists to keep out the rogue traders that give short trade courses such a bad name. By policing members, the Alliance gives confidence back to the public, allowing them to clearly see which companies will provide the sound training they need in return for their hard-earned cash.

But back to the issue of the length of courses, the majority of complaints come from time-served

professionals – but the strange irony is that most time-served professionals were taught through 'grandfathers' rites' 20, 30, 40 years ago – so what they are saying is that they have never received formal training. Just because you have been a tradesman for 30 years doesn't mean you understand good practice, latest innovations, and new materials. Bad habits are easily passed on.

I have worked as a tiler for 20 years myself, and have seen these time-served professionals dot and dabbing large format porcelain, not using batons or spacers, adding water to rapid set adhesive because it's drying out – the list of bad practice goes on and on. The construction world is aware of it, but it's so much easier to blame this on short courses and the professionals they produce because it's convenient to do so, an excuse to hide behind.

Using STC as an example, we have never oversold the results of becoming a professional after only two or four weeks. What we do tell people is that once they're trained they will be in a range of students that vary in ability from excellent to average.

But each and every one will be at a level where they can earn a genuine living, even if it's sticking to simple kitchen floors or basic bathrooms. They just need to be honest with themselves about their abilities and pitch themselves at the right market.

The training itself is up to date and covers the very best techniques and materials. The problem is when you get sub-standard work from tradesmen who've been taught to cut corners, just as through grandfathers' rites. It comes back to the quality of the training every time.

So does an NVQ level 2 alone mean you are a competent and reliable tiler? In a nutshell: no. Does an NVQ alone teach you how to

deal with customers? Does it teach customer care, the importance of time keeping, how to market your skills, how to become self employed, about tax liabilities, cleanliness, or presentation? No, it doesn't.

But by combining recognised qualifications with relevant real life training, geared towards generating conscientious, self-employed tradesmen, and you get competent and reliable people that get the job done to be best possible standards.

When someone leaves one of our courses, they are competent enough to make a living as a professional tradesman in the domestic market. The NVQ follows free of charge in most cases and within three to nine months they have a recognised qualification to work on a building site or for a contractor.

There are few training centres like STC out of the 40 or so in the same market, but if a few more spent their efforts on supporting people into employment as we do then the industry would be buoyant with decent tradesmen, not bickering about the length of training.

Are short courses the future to get people back into our diminished construction workforce? Yes they are, and they are here to stay whether you like it or not. These people are the tradesmen and women of tomorrow and while all these has-beens are wittering on with the same old mantra that is 40 years out of date about how things were in their day, the world is moving on without them.

We live in a constantly evolving world, and if we, as a country, spend one more second looking backwards because of inappropriate and antiquated views and refuse to embrace real progress, it really will be enough to make anyone cry.

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