

Network power fights future challenges

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In this **Builders' Merchants News** Q&A, [Allan Durning](#), executive chairman of [NBG](#), explains why being invited to become a member of the [Worshipful Company of Builders' Merchants](#) is of benefit to all merchants, across all regions.

What will be our industry's biggest challenge over the next few years and how will the Worshipful Company of Builders' Merchants help the industry?

The Worshipful Company of Builders' Merchants is embedded in the centre of the industry. One of its main objectives is to work towards facilitating connections and attitudes for the good of the industry to enable it to thrive.

Our industry stands on the edge of a set of massive challenges. We have fast-moving and changing channels to market, we have new market entrants who are taking advantage of changing regulations, modern methods of construction that are altering traditional practices and the pressures that are placed on our RMI customers by perhaps better organised customer-facing sheds. All these factors are creating a perfect storm for merchants.

The sheds will start to become better organised and to improve. They might also start to target key people and to poach key individuals within our industry. By transporting merchants into their business, they will be able to achieve a lift, in terms of knowledge and skills. I really believe that this is something that could happen within the next five years.

When you say 'targeting key people' are you thinking in terms of acquisitions?

Both the acquisition of businesses and of individuals. As industries, merchants and the sheds have been living in separate bubbles. There has been no exchange. I think those bubbles will burst and that there will be a migration either way as organisations change.

Take Travis Perkins as an example. That company has a 'best in class' DIY operation with Wickes. It is independently audited by the DIY community.

It won't be long before the Kingfishers, Focus DIY or the Tesco's will consider acquiring several sets of merchants in order to give a better balance to their offer.

The ability to manage change in a turbulent market will be a

determining factor for the merchant sector.

Ten years ago we would not have thought that companies like Everest would be selling combi boilers or that Anglian Windows would become a direct seller in our RMI space, offering 'home improvements' such as garage doors and woof windows among other types of product offers. We laughed at B&Q's so-called trade offering 10 years ago.

These days, companies like Burdens are sub-contracting their logistics to B&Q trade counters.

The Worshipful Company has always had a very low profile in our industry. How did you become aware of it? What was your impression of what it is and does?

It's an organisation that pulls the threads of the industry together at a senior level. The individuals who are now involved are serious players. Of course, there are senior figures who are now retired. They may no longer be active in our industry, but their know-ledge is there to be drawn upon by the people who are active at senior management levels within our industry.



The Worshipful Company launched a revamped newsletter in April, designed to reflect a new openness.

An organisation like the Worshipful Company will always have criticism thrown at it because to some it is seen as a 'secret

society'. Of course, it's no secret. It has a website. Have a look at www.wcobm.co.uk and find out more about an organisation that is instrumental for networking within our industry.

By being a part of the Worshipful Company, a switched on individual will very quickly get to understand the constituent parts of our industry - who is making the decisions and who is influencing those decisions, going forward.

The Worshipful Company is about senior people in our industry networking, promoting high standards, enhancing education and also providing charitable relief to those less fortunate.

I became a liveryman in 2009 and since then my view of the Company has changed. I now realise the massive hidden potential the organisation has to be a strong and effective networking platform for senior people inside and outside of our industry.

It is the type of environment where one would feel comfortable inviting senior politicians and other decision-makers to visit so that they could begin to understand our industry and the big issues within it. The people that make up the Company's members are very eloquent.

The level of dedication and the size and task of the unpaid workload that the members and the Master undertake to promote our industry for the benefit of others is truly phenomenal.

You are now the archivist of the Worshipful Company. What do you hope will be the result of the work you are currently doing behind-the-scenes?

I wanted to assist and put something back into the industry and stepped in when the past Master Ken Pepperrell wanted to get the archive off the ground ahead of the Company's 50th Anniversary celebrations.

I was asked to become a member of the Company by Chris Hayward, managing director of the National Merchant Buying Society. He is someone I admire and is also a straight thinker.

I believe it is very important to have a properly archived document of the history of our industry. When you look at the other livery companies, they all have documents, their treasures on display, published articles. We are behind them, and given that we live in an era of modern technology, I believe we are not harnessing it to the extent that we should be.

From a personal perspective I felt that becoming a liveryman would

be a useful platform for me to truly understand the industry.

I am currently contemplating undertaking a doctorate in the field of builders' merchanting post WWII and the development of our supply chain. The Worshipful Company would allow me to gain access to people who are a mine of information about our industry from both sides of the supply chain.

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