

The Telegraph

East European builders 'ended DIY'

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Date: 19th April 2015

Eastern European workers are good for firms and the economy, says John Carter, CEO of Wickes owner Travis Perkins



Travis Perkins has 600 branches selling timber and other building materials Photo: Alamy

Britain has benefited from Eastern European immigration because it has made home improvements cheaper, according to the boss of the UK's leading construction supplies company.

John Carter, chief executive of Travis Perkins, the £5.6bn a year building and plumbing supplies business which owns the Wickes chain, said the influx of skilled workmen from the former Soviet bloc introduced competition to the market. He said it had created a "Do it for me" culture that ended the era of "Do it yourself".

"It was driven by the influx of Eastern European builders who were skilled and competent," said Mr Carter. "They regulated prices and gave people a choice. The UK fell out of love with DIY from the peak when Changing Rooms and Ground Force were on TV."

But he said Britain was now a country where the skills were being lost to carry out all but the most minor of household jobs. "'Do it for me' is here to stay," he said. "We've reversed the capacity for DIY over the past 10 years. There's a lack of ambition to do it and people prefer to enjoy their social life than to do DIY."

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Shows such as Changing Rooms marked the high point of British DIY prowess

Poland joined the European Union along with seven other Eastern European countries in May 2004, leading to a flood of immigrant workers, including many builders. The EU migrant worker permissions were widened to Romania and Bulgaria last year.

Mr Carter has been with FTSE 100-listed Travis Perkins for 37 years, having joined as a management trainee when the business was Samdell Perkins. He was elevated to chief executive in January, overseeing the estate of more than 2,000 outlets and 24,000 staff.

Last month, the company announced plans to add 400 new branches and create 4,000 jobs over the next four years. The company's consumer arm, which includes Wickes, Toolstation and Tile Giant, and has annual sales of £1.3bn, has been the biggest beneficiary of the end of the British love affair with DIY. While its stores are open to the public, many of its customers are small builders and plumbers.

"We would much prefer [the public] bring in a tradesman who they know will do the job well," said Mr Carter, adding that the average visit to Wickes takes just eight minutes as jobbing builders rush in and out before heading back to their sites. "Overall [people] will get much more satisfaction from the job [if it has been done professionally]."

He said that the recent announcement by B&Q that it is to close 60 stores and that Homebase plans to shut a quarter of its outlets presents an opportunity for his company. Wickes – which sees itself as an Aldi or Lidl taking on Tesco but in the building sector – typically carries just 11,000 product lines per outlet, while Mr Carter estimates rivals Homebase and B&Q carry 40,000.

Travis Perkins, which updates on first-quarter sales on Wednesday, is also looking to expand its digital offering. The company is targeting £100m of online sales this year. Click and collect is a major focus for the business and part of the reason it is looking for another 60 outlets to add to its 200 Wickes stores.

Link: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/11546653/Eastern-European-builders-ended-DIY.html>