

THE FABRICATOR

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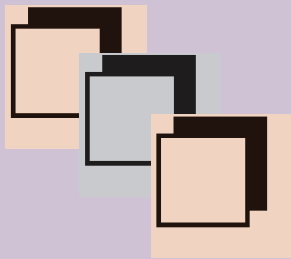
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I am always interested to see what I wrote this time last year. Last October we were severely restricted in what we could do, who we could see and how many at a time. I mentioned that 'Handsy' Hancock had cancelled Christmas. Though, if I remember correctly, we were soon, once again in total lockdown and everything was cancelled.

The good news was that the home improvement sector was taking off because lockdown had meant no holidays and householders were sitting on piles of unspent cash.

A year on and we are still busy but the problems are different. The two big issues are a shortage of skilled labour and raw materials. And at the time of writing all of this compounded by a, probably unnecessary, fuel shortage.

The government blames all this on Covid but Brexit must take a big share of the blame. A big part of our workforce came from Eastern European countries. If Covid had not happened Brexit would still have sent most of them them packing. When the government stopped free movement of people the labour shortage was a predictable consequence. It is just that this government seems to be oblivious to the likely consequences of many of its actions.

The furlough scheme was a brilliant move to keep businesses ticking over and people, apparently, in jobs. It has now ended so we will see what that does to the unemployment figures given that there are apparently around a million job vacancies at present. If there is a big upturn in people being fired it is questionable whether they will be able to instantly fill the vacancies. Square pegs and round holes spring to mind. There are a couple of reasons: the skills shortage means that many people will need training – or re-training from their previous job, and many of the jobs nobody wants to do anyway. That is the real reason we have always relied on migrant workers. You can't fill British jobs with British workers, as the government would like, if the British workers don't want to do the jobs in the first place.

5,000 limited term visas are not going to fill 100,000 driver's jobs and why would anyone come here anyway? The 'hostile environment' created by Teresa May is alive and well in the home office.

There is no doubt that we need to re-instate training as a follow on to education. Sending school leavers into further education was originally a scheme to control youth unemployment. Somewhere in the seventies this escalated to sending everyone to university which is no doubt fun but doesn't seem to prepare the majority of people for the workforce. Which is one reason we all came to rely on Polish builders!

I have never been sure about the modern apprenticeship schemes but they may be a start. I began my career as an apprentice in the print trade so I feel I am entitled to comment. Also, that training stood me in good stead and landed me my first job in publishing as a production editor.

The GGF's new apprenticeship scheme may help plug the skills gap in this industry. As long as the industry gets on board and can make glass, glazing and fenestration an attractive prospect for young people it may work well. And everyone involved should bear also in mind that long term, in addition to training a workforce, we are giving skills and knowledge to a future generation of management.

John Roper