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Construction Q&A
with Duncan Robertson: Dodd Group – Ops Manager

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Coronavirus, Brexit and Mental Health. How is the construction industry handling these factors?

I recently virtually met up with Duncan Robertson, Operations Manager at Dodd Group Bristol. I wanted to speak to somebody in the construction industry to get a first hand idea of what is going on whilst we navigate through the most turbulent times many of us have ever known.

With Brexit, Coronavirus and a mental health crisis all deserving of our attention, many industries have struggled to remain positive and maintain a level of profitability that is comfortable. The construction industry has arguably been less affected by these factors than many others.

What would you say has been the biggest positive this past year in spite of the pandemic?

Being allowed as an industry, over and above other industries, to continue trading. Dodd Group have been exceptionally supportive of their staff. As a business they have really weathered the storm which is admirable.

The pandemic has affected everyday life such as digitalisation, how have you found that to be useful in the delivery of projects?

Whilst online meetings have been an option for a long time pre-Covid, it has encouraged people into using

technology a lot more. I see it as a positive in many ways, I can run things much more efficiently using platforms such as Teams. It cuts down on travel time, as well as having a positive impact on the environment as there are less carbon emissions etc.

I find it can be a more efficient way to work, you put more time and effort into the actual meeting rather than the surrounding factors. The only negative I think is that you can find yourself in meeting after meeting, it can be a bit intense but I do seem to get more done and a lot more resolved so for me, it is a good thing. It does mean that you lose the personal element where you don't see people as much, I think it's important for mental wellbeing to maintain social interaction.

What predictions do you have going into 2021 that you wouldn't have expected going into 2020?

From a business perspective there's almost a whole new set of rules that you have to consider now. Construction is already strictly governed by Health & Safety Legislation, we now have a new set of Covid-related documents to adhere to.

Social distancing has changed expectations when planning projects, you can't just put a couple of cabins on site and have five people in each one. There needs to be plenty of space. It has definitely changed the way we plan projects, even things like planning a walkway in and out of site with a one way system.

In Bristol the construction industry seems to be quite buoyant. Dodd Group are in a good place, we have secured some good work and we have a great year ahead of us. We're already planning work into 2022.



Which is the most exciting project in your opinion going into 2021?

We have lots of great projects, I wouldn't want to pit one against the other. We have residential schemes, an open office block which is quite interesting as all the fixtures are exposed, we're going to be showcasing our building services, which also comes with its challenges. Our installations are always completed to a high standard, but when everything is on show to the end user we really have to ensure the aesthetics are exceptional.

With 'on show' projects it's vital to ensure the design and coordination is correct in the early stages. We have to put the hard work in upfront, if it's all done properly, we would expect the installation to follow through quite smoothly.

Have you found it difficult with contractors or 'on the ground' staff to adhere to new guidelines?

There was a bit of early stage reluctance like anything. Some people adapt to change very quickly, some people take a little more time. I think people are getting used to it now, it has been going on for a long time. Some of it is here to stay, it's just going to be implemented into your daily life. Things like being allowed to stand at the bar in your local pub, I don't think that will come back. You lose that social aspect with all the restrictions, like ordering food and drinks through an app. I think social interaction is going to be permanently changed.

What processes have you found to be more challenging in terms of government guidelines constantly changing?

It has certainly heightened the amount of procedures we have to adhere to. There's more paperwork, more reading, putting more posters up, restricting what people can do such as only one person to use the toilet block or having staggered break times to reduce contact. As a business we have rolled out guideline packs to ensure all staff are aware but the goalposts do seem to move a lot. Our QHSE department is great, they respond quickly and the information gets filtered down through the company.

With hiring processes being impacted, we've found that people aren't necessarily as willing to move. Have you found that you're looking to hire more contractors?

Not at all. We have been, and still are hiring for permanent staff. People have been made redundant so there's lots of people out there looking for work. Whilst construction has remained largely buoyant, unfortunately some people have been laid off so hopefully Dodd Group can offer an opportunity. We have found that there are more electrical staff available for engineering roles but that's been an ongoing thing in construction I've found. You don't know what the future holds. I joined Dodd Group through this period and it has been really positive for me.

What steps have Dodd Group taken to ensure a diverse and inclusive workforce?

I would love to see more women in construction, it is a largely male-dominated industry. Whether it's a case of just getting women interested in construction in the early days, or is the industry generally less accepting of women? I think it is important to hire the person who is best for the job and I wouldn't make a decision based on gender as a factor, I would hire whoever would be

the best fit for the role. I know that Dodd Group is working hard to attract a diverse workforce and our HR manager frequently visits schools to encourage pupils to join our industry. She is particularly keen to promote the sector to young women, and is a staunch supporter of initiatives such as International Women in Engineering Day.



How do you think Brexit coming into fruition is going to affect the business growth of Dodd Group?

It's still early stages with the whole Brexit process and there's a lot of speculation and anticipation surrounding this. Wholesalers are requesting we get orders in as early as we can because of the uncertainty around availability, especially with some imported materials.

Whilst additional paperwork required at the docks may be slowing a few things down a little, this is just a teething problem. As a business we forward order all major plant and materials so this doesn't really impact us.

As an industry I do think there will be a settling in period, it may well promote British manufacturing and springboard that industry to a place where it was 30+ years ago, like British steel for example.

The pandemic has really impacted a lot of people's mental health, what have Dodd Group got in place to support staff?

We do have policies in terms of HR communication. We roll out awareness and encourage staff to talk to each other and management to check in on their staff to ensure they are okay. We have mental health first aiders within the business, sometimes all it takes is a (socially distanced!) arm around the shoulder. It's human nature. We do have policies and procedures in place but we also just consider that everybody is human and sometimes we just need a chat.



To surmise, the conversation with Duncan was extremely positive. Dodd Group as a business are handling the turbulence of Covid-19, Brexit and mental health issues exceptionally well. The last twelve months have been more challenging than anybody could have predicted, but with a positive mindset and taking action for effective change, the future is bright.

If you would like to discuss further, please contact lauren.webster@executivenetworkgroup.co.uk