ADAPT TO CHANGE

Ian Spreadborough, Co-Founder and Director at IOBAC Ltd looks at how flexible flooring can facilitate a more sustainable workplace fit for the modern-day worker.

Sustainability. It's all around us, influencing our day-to-day lives more than ever before. Whether it's reduced energy consumption, choosing sustainable suppliers and greener equipment, or raising awareness among employees, everywhere we look businesses are implementing more sustainable working practices. But what if they're missing an opportunity right under their noses?

BIG COMMITMENTS NEED BIG IDEAS

First, let's set the scene. The UK is the first major economy to commit to net zero emissions by 2050, while the world and UK Green Building Councils, in line with the Paris Climate Agreement, have stated that all new buildings will need to be net zero by 2030 and all existing buildings by 2050.

These are bold yet necessary ambitions that we can't afford not to achieve, and that will change the way buildings are designed and built forever. Flexible, sustainable flooring is up to the task and can play a central role in fulfilling these commitments.

FLEXIBLE FLOORING FOR FLEXIBLE WORKSPACES

Co-working, serviced or managed offices; whatever the set-up, flexible workspaces have ridden the crest of a wave for the past five years with global demand increasing by 50%. In the UK, research from global surveyors, JLL, predicts that flexible office space will account for over 8.5% of total office stock by 2023. That's an increase of around 5% from 2020 and represents one of the highest penetration rates globally. To facilitate this step change, contemporary flooring needs to be as flexible as the workplaces into which it's being installed, whether that's for a new-build or refurbishment project.

Flexible or modular flooring solutions provide a healthy, sustainable flooring choice, offering design agility through fast, hassle-free installation and easy access and maintenance. How's it done? The first step is to install a magnetically receptive base, with the options including a dry-laid acoustic underlay, using the existing metal raised access floor, or a fast-curing resin. In most cases, this requires minimal preparation and no sealants, primers, or plywood bases. Often, it's even possible to go straight over existing flooring with no uplift required. Then, with the magnetically-receptive base in place, you're free to install your choice of top surface tile, including standard carpet and luxury vinyl tile using IOBAC's MagTabs, or magnetic timber, ceramic and LVT direct.

WHAT'S SO SUSTAINABLE ABOUT THAT?

Well, there are a number of facets to this; flooring waste being one of the most troublesome. Traditional floorcoverings are notoriously difficult materials to recycle and even 100% recyclable products can run into difficulties when they're installed using adhesive-based methods. This is because, on uplift, the floor tile is more likely to be contaminated by not only the adhesive but also the subfloor to which it was adhered, meaning it's not suitable for recovery and reuse and can't be recycled.

Let's look at the numbers. A recent report by Changing Markets Foundation estimates that an area the size of the city of Birmingham, UK is thrown away in carpet every year. This equates to around 400,000 tonnes, over half of which currently goes into landfill. But it doesn't have to be this way.

Single-use flooring adhered to a base is a thing of the past. We all try, where possible, to re-use our previously single-use plastic shopping bags. Why should flooring be any different? With a magnetic flooring installation, there's no residue left on either the tile or the floor. The base remains uncontaminated and ready for installation of new tiles right away, with no preparation required. What's more, the flooring that's been uplifted is more easily recycled and perfectly safe and fine to reuse elsewhere. Rethinking flooring as a reusable design element has to be the most environmentally preferred approach to protecting our environment.

REDUCING EMBODIED AND OPERATIONAL EMISSIONS

A crucial part of the UK Green Building Council's framework is reducing the embodied and operational carbon emissions associated with products and construction. This is why, from IOBAC's perspective, we aim to ensure that our products use recycled materials wherever possible and are recyclable themselves, whether it's our Ezy-Install underlay made from recycled rubber tyres, or our metal additives from scrap iron.

The lack of adhesives and chemicals required to install IOBAC technologies, and the associated emissions incurred to produce those adhesives and chemicals in the first place, also contributes to overall lower embodied emissions. Embodied emissions include the carbon dioxide emitted during the manufacture, transport, and construction of building materials, together with end-of-life emissions.

The reduction of operational emissions (emissions of carbon dioxide during the operational or in-use phase of the building) is also a key driver in the UK construction industry. Flexible flooring helps reduce these operational emissions by shrinking a building's carbon footprint throughout its entire lifecycle. How? By transforming maintenance, repair, and replacement. All activities that, traditionally, can not only be time-consuming and costly, but bad for the environment.

Let's say, for example, that the electrics beneath a metal raised access floor need to be fixed or replaced. Flexible magnetic flooring can simply be peeled up, tile by tile, much like a fridge magnet, for access and maintenance, and easily replaced or put back down again. No costly install, minimal downtime, and importantly, no damage done to the environment.

Or, consider a business which has recently occupied an office space wanting to install flooring in-keeping with its own branding. Using traditional solutions would likely require a complete or large-scale refit at a significant cost to your business and the environment. Again, magnetic flooring can be used to personalise a space, with minimal time, effort, and mess.

THE FUTURE IS FLEXIBLE

It's without doubt an exciting time for the workplace, with flexibility and agility being key design considerations. But it's also a serious one for the building and construction industry at large. Now is the time to put the wheels in motion for a more sustainable future. And through the use of experienced flooring contractors and innovative installation techniques, it can be achieved.

Fast installation and flexible products can combine to deliver not only outstanding workplace designs and user experiences, but also a cost-effective and truly sustainable alternative to traditional flooring solutions.

WORKSPACES POST-COVID-19

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be deep-rooted and wide-ranging, and the fallout will likely touch all aspects of our lives in one way or another. Where and how we work will be no different.

While the use of coworking spaces will probably be a short-term dip post COVID-19, the flexibility they offer may well pay dividends for businesses and workers in the long-term. This is for a few of reasons. Firstly, remote workers will still need somewhere to work and while we've all become more adept at working from home, for many people this isn't feasible forever.

Secondly, COVID-19 has shut down a quarter of UK businesses and more than a million companies are reported to be in 'significant distress'. This pandemic has already caused long-lasting economic damage and businesses – now encouraged by how well its workforces have adapted to remote working – may still want a place to call their own, but without the long-term contractual commitment. Coworking spaces can offer a happy medium: flexibility and typically cheaper rates combined with a semi-permanent base from which to work.

Whether it's coworking or conventional office spaces, the fallout from COVID-19 points toward a sustained period of flux for the commercial office sector.

Office spaces will generally be more fluid – they'll change hands, and some will be repurposed. Businesses may well look to de-densify their offices to mitigate any future disruption, meaning they'll need more of them to accommodate the same number of staff. Whatever the outcome, in many cases this will mean new flooring. Now is as good a time as any to re-evaluate our approach to office flooring – and flooring in general – and to choose a solution that's easier, more efficient, and crucially, better for the environment.

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