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The construction sector has undergone significant change in the past decade, but what does the future hold for the sector? Insider gathered top contractors and other experts at Turner & Townsend's base in Manchester

JIM CARTER

deputy chairman, Eric Wright Group
Construction is busy at the moment. There is talk of the sector growing, but that's almost entirely residential-led. We're not convinced that's been occupier-led – and will it come to an end quickly?

Looking to the future, I think availability of labour is a key factor. The government keeps dipping in and out of apprenticeship schemes but uncertainty of schemes has meant people haven't adjusted quickly enough, and the sector hasn't responded either.

I think the future will depend a lot more on tech, prefab and factory-built elements. I think it's exciting, with an awful lot of change.

MARK PERKINS

consultant, CACI

There is a consensus that construction is perhaps behind the curve in embracing new tech, but that's not to say that's going to be the case for the future.

It's great that people want to explore things like prefabrication and 3D printing, but we often go in to organisations and they don't have the basics

right. There needs to be change, and things like BIM (building information modeling) mean there's a demand for better use of data and collaboration. With large contractors there is a gap in skills and there also needs to be cultural change.

Companies are collecting so much data they don't know how to bring it together in a timely way. If you have manually inputted data, you could be making decisions off the wrong information. Putting that right, and a structure in place, is a good starting point.

PAUL STRUTT

managing director, Bardsley

We're looking at 1 per cent improvement in business efficiencies next year. We are talking about analysis, but we already collected a lot of data on site performance, costs, materials etc. We can analyse the information but it's that next stage that we need to get to.

How do we bring all this data from up to 20 jobs and do something a bit more proactive? We monitor against each project rather than against the wider performance of the business.

In terms of helping to get more young people into construction, we sponsor an initiative called Class of Your Own to support engineering in technology. You have to give time to go to the school and take part, and the kids loved it.

"WITH LARGE CONTRACTORS THERE IS A GAP IN SKILLS AND THERE ALSO NEEDS TO BE CULTURAL CHANGE."

MARK PERKINS

MUCKING IN TOGETHER

TOM DEACON

global head of digital, Turner & Townsend

We're hearing a lot about advance construction, but there are a lot of basics in making sure the data we collect is fit for purpose and putting it together in one place. I've always found when you put data together that hasn't been linked before, you'll find something of great value.

Construction companies are operating a portfolio: some are profitable, others not, and hopefully you make a small margin. For me, that stops sharing of data, and the key in productivity is openness of data to drive efficiency. There are commercial barriers but I think a deal needs to be done for collaboration, enabling us to look at the whole life-cycle of a project.

COLETTE MORGAN-FORD

partner, Weightmans

Construction generally is not known for productivity being its strong point, but, with new technology, off-site manufacture and BIM, that should be a lot better.

Increasing use of tech-driven methods in construction is about everybody getting on board. You have traditional older guys and all these new methods they need to embrace. Unfortunately, generally people don't like change, but that's the way things are going. There is something in the industry moving to a more collaborative approach.

Everybody is collecting this data and looking at it themselves, and will have a self-serving view. There needs to be more collaboration and openness.

MARK NICHOLSON

chief executive, Forrest

In our housing business, a lot comes down to prefabrication. We have to be more efficient, because the resourcing of construction projects will become even more difficult with the government having set the challenge of creating 300,000 affordable homes each year.

Resources that were in major projects are going to move to housing, which will create challenges for high-rise construction.

Taking it into the factory poses its challenge in that prefabrication has high mobilisation costs. In high-rise construction each building is different. Trying to get the mobilisation and volume through the factory to make it viable is why you see so many prefabrication companies going bust, but it's something we're looking at.

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MARK NICHOLSON

DAVE MCGOFF

executive director, McGoff Group

McGoff has tried to get a blend between development and constructing for third parties – it's moved to 60 to 70 per cent self-generated work. In recent years we've diversified to become a care home operator, born out of looking for alternative uses for the land in residential.

We're acquiring, designing, building and operating, and it's only when you're in each of those camps that you understand how large the gap is between those elements. We have realised when handing buildings over and operating them how much more you can do. The best results are where the client is sat at the initial meetings.

MIKE BANTON

managing director, Artez

We're boutique and we do things a bit differently – we have that early involvement with some repeat clients.

The key to a lot of construction's issues is millennials and new people coming in. We need to make the

construction industry sexy, embrace tech and innovation. People talk about BIM, but it's centred on public sector projects involving tens of millions of pounds. I was talking to a designer who has scrapped BIM and employed people from Ubisoft to integrate gaming technology and use 3D models.

There will be a new industry that's the link between offsite manufacture and builders. I think universities and schools should be teaching new modules that aren't about construction and off-site manufacture – something new.

Our successful smaller projects are all about the contractors having more involvement and sharing the profit. We have some projects where we have negotiated to do the job at cost and overheads then share the proceeds.

BILL WORSLEY

regional business manager, Scape

Scape Group operates five supplier frameworks in construction. Our clients are all public sector and involving contractors early is key – then we can timeline projects together.

I think in construction Brexit leads to uncertainty over public sector contractors. There is a question whether the government will adopt the EU's tender process. I think it will, given it's enshrined in law now.

