

## webwatch

**UK** small businesses are losing out on valuable consumer spend by not fully utilising the internet, according to a new report commissioned by TalkTalk Business.

The research reveals that as many as 80% of consumers use the internet to find out about a product or service before buying it, and 40% put off buying a product or service if no website is available.

Professor David Storey, Head of SME research at the Warwick Business School believes that small businesses are still lagging behind when it comes to making the most of the internet.

"The research clearly shows that three out of ten of us would prefer to buy from small businesses and 65% of us feel better if they buy from a smaller business rather than a large national organisation," said Professor Storey. "But small businesses are missing out on this goodwill as in many instances they do not have a website or if they do it is not a good representation of the business."

## Talent Spotting

**A** third of UK firms believe a shortage of quality staff poses the biggest threat to their business and that the talent drought is forcing them to offer above-inflation pay rises to attract and retain employees.

Data from the recent Lloyds TSB Corporate Markets Business in Britain survey shows that 33% of firms cite the skills gap as posing the biggest threat to their firm over the next six months. In comparison, just 4% consider terrorism to be the main threat. The scarcity of skilled labour is now so acute that 48% of all firms surveyed experienced difficulty recruiting skilled staff, while a further 17% have had similar problems recruiting unskilled labour, despite the influx of workers from Eastern Europe.

Diana Brightmore-Armour, Managing Director of Lloyds TSB Corporate Markets, said, "All the signs are that the skills gap is deteriorating, putting additional strains on the management of UK

businesses as they try to attract talent ahead of overseas competition. This is having a domino effect on salaries as employers have to pay more to keep staff, at a time when escalating energy prices are already stretching the purse-strings for most UK businesses. It's a sensible time for managers to focus on their people management as well as their financial management."

To download a copy of the Business in Britain report go to [www.lloydstsbcorporatemarkets.com](http://www.lloydstsbcorporatemarkets.com) and click through.

VIEWPOINT is the newsletter of the Institute of Construction Management (ICM) and is for circulation to the members of the Institute. Articles or comments for inclusion are very welcome and in any form.

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## THE INSTITUTE OF CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT



**An established institute for all levels of management**

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## Diary dates

### April 2007

- 11 Commercial Marine & Piling  
Southern Region CPD lecture  
Mountbatten Centre, Alexandra  
Park, Portsmouth  
Eric Richards: 02392 618049

### May 2007

- 9 CPD Roadshow, Glasgow  
Swallow Hotel
- 10 CPD Roadshow, Edinburgh  
Marriott Hotel
- 15 CPD Roadshow, Coventry  
Coventry Arena
- 17 CPD Roadshow, Cambridge  
Menzies Hotel

### FREE CPD Roadshows

Contact: 01707 282880 or email  
[air.conditioning@meuk.mee.com](mailto:air.conditioning@meuk.mee.com)

Please send any dates and venues of interest, socially or professionally, to the editor at the address below and in written form.

# Viewpoint

Winter 2007

[www.the-icm.com](http://www.the-icm.com)

## Building Bridges and Bungalows

**T**wo years ago we made the decision to stop working and to move home completely to France. This caused a mixture of responses from family and friends, and phrases such as "Fools rush in..." and "What ever for?..." were undoubtedly said when we were not present.

The decision was made after quite some heart-searching and we considered that it would be more sensible to buy a new property than to fall in the trap of buying and renovating. Many Brits have bought old properties that are "in need of a little renovation" and then have spent an unreasonable amount of their time and money making a shambles into a habitable home. It was my view that on retiring from the building industry, why spend the next x number of years working in one's own building site – our aim was to live in France and to see as much of this country as possible!

We therefore chose to have a bungalow built on a green-field site and it is that in which we are now living. However the phrase that comes to mind now is "if only we knew then what we know now!"

Certainly we do not regret what we did in any way; it is just that in doing it we crossed many boundaries of building culture and methods. The first problem we encountered was the French attitude to time, as this was contrary to my views, having come from an industry where time was as precious as money. We discovered that the time taken from receiving a quotation right through to the final handover of the bungalow was

as flexible as a rubber band, always stretching in one direction only. For this reason we were only able to arrive in France in October and not in July of 2004 as originally planned.

Handover of the bungalow was an experience! The average French builder has a different understanding of "quality" from what UK contractors set as a norm. Their overall workmanship is of an acceptable level but the finer points of finishings leave much to be desired. Unfortunately it can best be achieved by refusing to sign the Acceptance Certificate and withholding money, but it's hard work! This we were forced to do to obtain an acceptable standard and despite sending emails to all concerned advising them of the date of our arrival with our furniture, the house was still not ready and we were obliged to spend two nights in a hotel, at the builder's expense, because the snagging and cleaning had still not been done in time.

One major difference is that it is accepted in France that when one buys a house, it is precisely that – paths, walls and fences, patios, driveways etc are all an extra and after moving in I had to set about contacting local tradesmen to complete the ancillary works, mostly cash in hand. In retrospect we should



not have arrived until these were complete because living on a building site put my wife under some stress which I could not appreciate at the time. There is, however a very good reason for building only the house on the plot. All taxes levied on the building works are assessed on the size and value of the property, and the Council Tax is levied on the number of rooms and facilities built with the house. By building only the minimum that will allow the Completion Certificate to be issued by the Local Authority, taxation is kept at a minimum level and then all the outstanding works can be completed, outside of the contract, as if the Client has done the additional work himself, which indeed is very often the case.

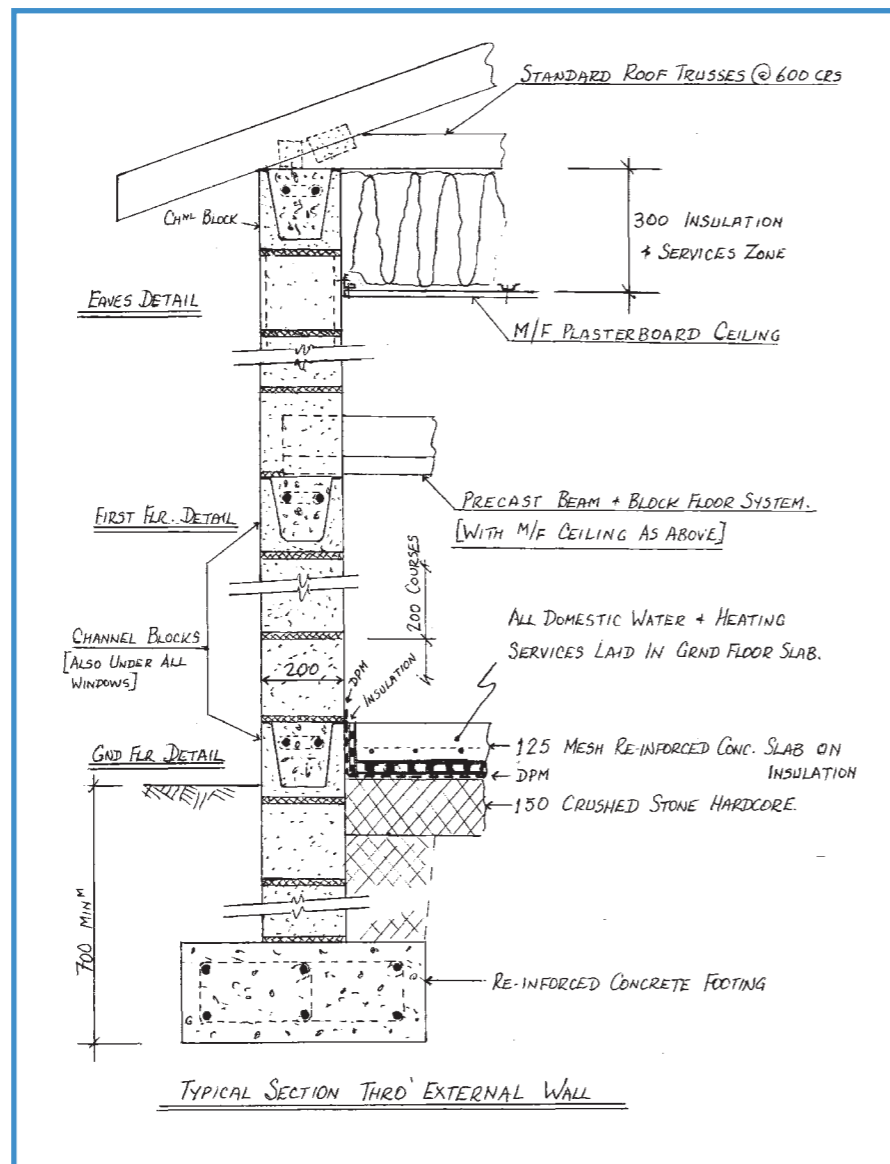
Having said that I had no intention of creating my own minor building industry, walking the dog each morning takes us past many bungalows in various stages of construction, and this has given me the opportunity to examine the building methods adopted in this country. They are certainly different and it would be easy to rubbish them against the allegedly more advanced methods and details of the UK, in comparison. One has to say in their favour that they comply with the Regulations which are driven by European Standards and they follow the concept of simplicity at all times. This has the advantage over UK techniques in that the bricklayers, who are just as thin on the ground over here,

work largely in a traditional manner and are not overwhelmed by the continuously changing specifications and building details which frequently overtake the UK bricklayers' experience and knowledge. Whereas the construction of walling used in the past was a basically simple operation, the details now being adopted in the UK to comply with thermal, sound and structural requirements have greatly increased the chances of there being residual errors within the masonry, which are very costly to remedy. The British concept of the cavity wall has introduced more potential errors than our continental cousins could ever envisage.

Construction of major works in France differs very little from what is carried out in the UK. The amount of reinforcement in structures always appears to be somewhat reduced but this is a trend that occurs as one travels further south in Europe because, for example, the standard "snow loading" required on roofs reduces as we move towards the Mediterranean, with its consequential effect of reducing the required structural strength of the whole building. The use of structural elements such as concrete, steelwork, glulam beams, and cut timber, together with glazing and external cladding systems differs very little from the UK – it is in simple dwellings that the differences are much more apparent.

Outside of major towns and cities, "spec" building is rare and the majority of private building is carried out by local companies to the personal requirements of the individual house purchaser. It is difficult to judge how this affects the price of the dwelling, but in the area of France, in which I live, there are no local companies with the financial base to build small estates and then to wait until buyers appear. This is their culture and is unlikely to change. The advantage of their method is that it is possible to purchase a "standard" house at a fixed price but also the buyer has the opportunity to customise the internal layout and fittings to suit his budget. It is this process in which we are currently involved so that we can have a new house built this year to our own style and requirements and to have a far greater involvement in the construction of this house compared with the standard bungalow previously built for us in France whilst we were resident in the UK.

Before consideration is given to purchasing land for a new home, it is necessary to verify with the local mayor's office if the land is approved



for "Urbanisation" This is similar to "Outline Planning Permission" and in France is granted to selected areas on a general basis and not as a result of a specific application

Construction work cannot commence until a "Permit to build" has been issued. This follows an application which is the equivalent to "Detailed Planning Application" combined with "Application for Building Regulations" This must include the results of the builder's obligation to check the site for the presence of asbestos and termites and his evaluation of the site's ground conditions relating to bearing capacity of the founding level and the presence of water.

Foundations of single and two storey buildings differ from the UK in that they are reinforced with pre-formed steel cages purchased as standard units from the builders' merchants.

This reinforcement is included

without any Structural Engineer's calculations and simply adds a greater rigidity to the strip footing. From this point up to the completion of the floor slab, the base of the house remains very similar to those in the UK and comprises blockwork, compacted hardcore, polythene DPM, insulation and mesh reinforced concrete slab with a trowelled finish for tiles. Before the floor slab is cast, all heating and water service pipes are also laid across the hardcore in flexi-ducting.

The final course of blocks up to floor level consist of channel blocks, into which is placed bar reinforcement and concrete to form a perimeter ring beam.

The main structural walls are built on this beam comprising dense concrete cellular blocks laid in a strong mortar. At all external and internal corners special blocks are built in, each block having a void which results in "formwork" for reinforced columns.

Again standard sections of caged steel are threaded down through the blocks to the starter bars at floor level which protrude from the reinforced footings. These columns extend up to the roof or first floor levels at which point there is a further ring beam formed in channel blocks as before. Roof level has been reached quickly with little more than blocks, mortar, lintels, standard reinforcement, and with a small quantity of concrete. Apart from any that may be required for load-bearing purposes, no internal walls have been constructed so far because with this more rigid form of masonry construction, external walls do not depend on internal masonry cross walls for stability. Roof level is reached quickly and a dry environment has been provided for trades to commence.

"How do we keep the damp at bay without cavity walls?" I hear being asked. The concept of cavity brickwork that has been part of UK construction for so long has been our method of excluding moisture from the internal face of a wall. Regrettably for many years it has increasingly become the indirect cause of much water entry resulting from bad workmanship, poor detailing and inadequate design considerations in relation to climatic conditions. Dirty wall ties, mortar "snots" around frames, unsecured cavity insulation, leaking cavity trays, fully filled cavities in exposed areas... the list is endless, and to prevent these problems, the supervision of bricklaying must be ever-present.

Our French builders continue as follows:

- All external walls are constructed of dense concrete cellular blockwork.
- All external walls are rendered with 18mm of coloured mortar which is substantially waterproof.
- The inner face of the external walls is clad with dry lining wall boarding on 100mm galvanized metal studs with rockwool or glassfibre insulation.
- All window and door frames are mechanically fixed to the blockwork reveals with metal clips but the window and door itself is located within this dry lining zone.
- The positioning of all of these elements and the very nature of the products is such that water has no route to cross into the plasterboard.

The balance of the internal works is much the same as in the UK with

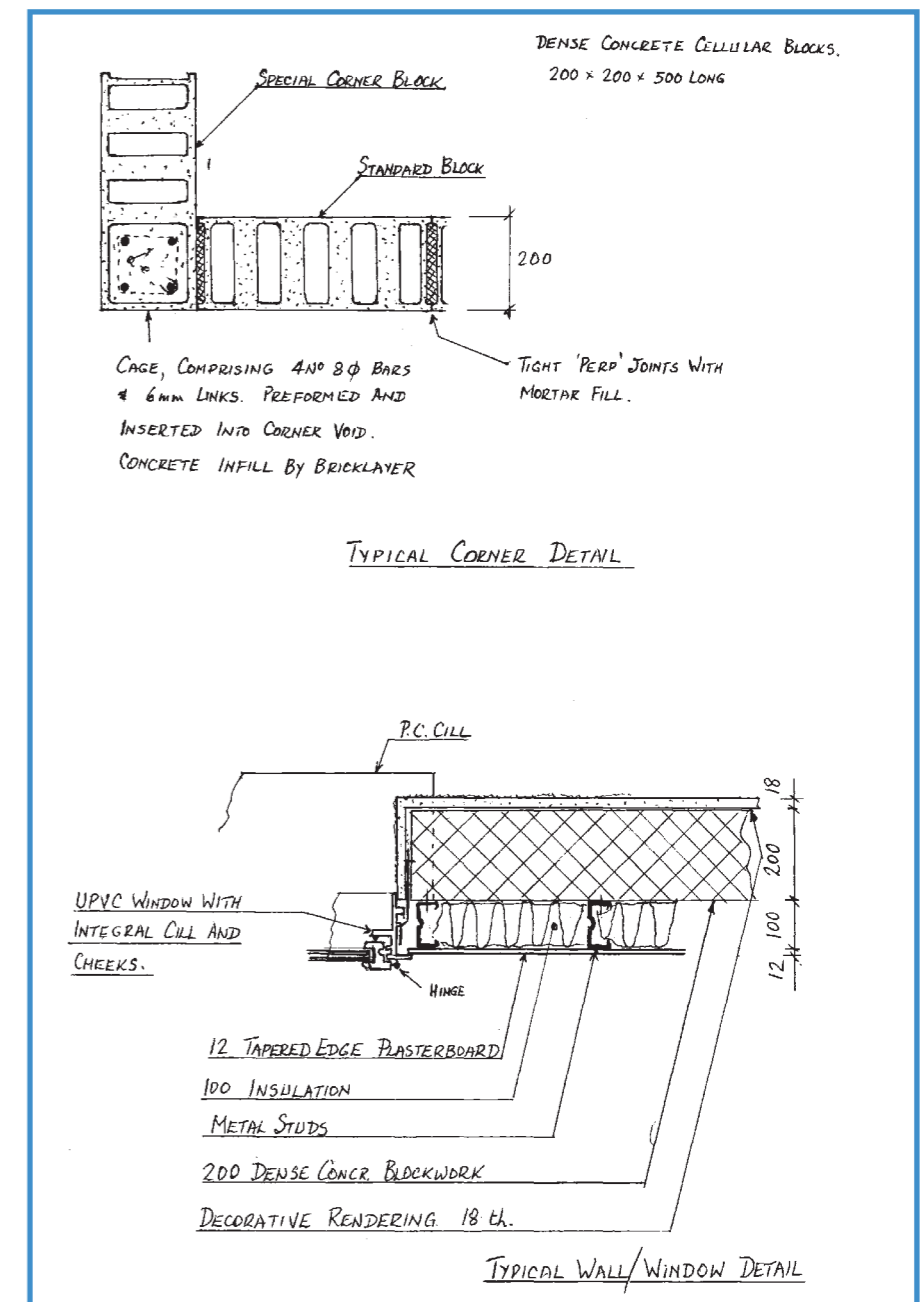
drylined metal stud partitions although the ceilings are generally a dry lining board on a suspended metal grid, similar to, but not the same as a M/F ceiling system. The ceiling is approximately 300mm below the roof trusses, thus allowing for easy installation of the electrical distribution followed by 300mm of ceiling insulation.

In the eighteen months in which we have lived here, we have found our bungalow to be fully watertight and warm. The insulation levels are much higher than in the UK and with a fully electrical house, the cooking, lighting and heating costs have averaged over a full year to £15.75 per week. In view of these extremely reasonable costs and

the current rise in oil and gas prices all over Europe, we have opted for underfloor electrical heating in our new house now that we live in a country that has ignored the pressure from the "Greens" and gone ahead with the construction of nuclear power stations which provide in excess of 70% of the country's need for energy.

Finally it was just a pity that although the method of building would have permitted an earlier completion, they were unable to take advantage of it due to their shortage of skilled labour exacerbated by the maximum 35 hour working week.

KR Mousdale  
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# Viewpoint

the someday supplement

## Train to gain

It is a given fact that one of the most effective ways to improve the productivity and commercial advantage of any company is to make sure that all the employees have the

correct skills to carry out their responsibilities within the organisation. Any company that seeks to maintain and develop the skills level of its work force stands to gain an advantage. This advantage is not only manifested in the quality of the finished work on site but will be seen as greater confidence by



the work force and a low turnover of employees.

The Learning and Skills Council have launched a national skills brokerage service, which provides free support and advice on all matters relating to skills and training. Its remit is specifically to help businesses to establish ongoing skills development within their workforce. These skills are across the board and apply as much to office staff, who are, remember, often taking the very first contact enquiry, as they do to site operatives.

A range of training is available and of interest to us are:- IT, health and safety, construction and business finance, full level 2 qualifications and apprenticeships. A large proportion of what is on offer will qualify for Government financial subsidy. You will be guided through the financial support package by your Skills Broker and if there are costs attached to your chosen package they will be clearly indicated at an early stage.

“Train to Gain is a dynamic new way of working with employers and is designed to put their business' skills development needs first and ensure that the delivery of training is much more responsive to their needs”. Peter Marsh : South East Skills director.

**To get you business 'fit' call:  
Train to Gain 0845 751 2288  
info@traintogain.co.uk  
www.traintogain.gov.uk**

## Health & Safety Seminar Reebok Stadium Bolton 10/11 October 07

Health and safety is regulated through the Health and Safety at Work Act (HSW) 1974 which states that employers have a duty to secure the health, safety and welfare of people at work, and also to protect the public from risks arising out of work activity.

There is a perception that there are now more health and safety regulations and red tape than ever. Although this is not strictly the case – in fact there were twice as many regulations and laws 35 years ago – it is still a daunting undertaking for any small business.

Health & Safety '07 is a new dedicated regional event – a national style show taken to the regions. The aim is to make life as simple as possible for health and safety personnel; they can access the best products and services locally and more easily through the exhibition; network with other local organisations and keep up-to-date with new regulations through the seminar programme.

WBE, the organiser of Health & Safety '07, is proud to have teamed up with key industry organisations resulting in two unique seminar programmes: one in collaboration with the London Metropolitan Branch of IOSH, the other put together by the show's title sponsor, DuPont, and the Event Partners: Aearo, Gore, Ansell and Principal People.

The seminar programme will prove essential to all decision-makers who share a responsibility to protect their workforce. This has been planned carefully and constructively so that it is easy for delegates to mix and match appropriate subject matters to create their own tailor-made agenda. Topics to be covered include common workplace risks; new regulations eg. noise, fire and asbestos; sourcing the correct Personal Protection garments and controlling contractors.

The exhibition and seminars are both free to enter, but seminar places are restricted so it is recommended that visitors pre-register.

Visit [www.healthandsafety07.co.uk](http://www.healthandsafety07.co.uk) for details.

# HEALTH + SAFETY / 07

## Achieve up to 30% renewable energy CPD Certified Seminars

15 March  
18 April  
17 May  
20 June

Mitsubishi Electric,  
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CPD events free of charge at the Mitsubishi training facility in Hatfield, Hertfordshire.

The papers being presented at this event have been independently certified as conforming to industry-wide CPD guidelines and will provide delegates with an opportunity to update themselves on this vitally important area.

Key note speakers include:

Andy Deacon, GLA;  
Steve Cardis, Merton Council;  
Matt Dickinson, BRE;  
Dr Ben Cartmell, Southfacing Services;  
Alan Jones, EDSL;  
Rex Ingram, OSMA Underfloor Heating;  
Mike Batty, Olympus KeyMed;  
Wayne Aston, Passivent and Chris Neeves, MLM.

To book your place contact 01701 282880 or email [air.conditioning@meuk.mee.com](mailto:air.conditioning@meuk.mee.com)

## ADJUDICATION OF A DISPUTE

Recent case law has consolidated the legally accepted meaning of the word “dispute” when used in arbitration clauses of contracts. The judge held that the word should have its normal everyday meaning and not be assigned some special or unusual meaning offered by lawyers. The points also made are:

- The fact that one party notifies another party of a claim does not necessarily mean that a dispute has arisen
- If the presented claim is so vague that it is not possible to

properly respond to it, neither non-reaction or non-admission is likely to give rise to a dispute

- The claimant is free to set what would be considered an unreasonable deadline but that would not at court be considered to curtail a reasonable time to respond

*A dispute does not arise unless and until a claim is not admitted*

- The time lapse between receiving the claim and responding can vary greatly and would depend upon the circumstances of the particular case and the time reasonably required to respond.



The name on the van says “Hipgrave”  
grave is where he may end up!

Your editor took this photo in Surrey last year.