

“To the limit... and beyond”



Andy Robins, MD of Snibor Ltd operates in a slightly different way to other building companies, as can be evidenced by spelling his name backwards to achieve the company name!

Not only that, but having joined the Royal Navy aged 16 and becoming a member of the Field Gun Crew - which required 18 men to handle 1½ tons of equipment across a track and take it apart in 2½ minutes at the Royal Tournament - it was ingrained in him that you can only do things properly if you know what you are doing.

Based in Gillingham, Dorset, Snibor is a small intelligent builder and designer who work with clients and industry professionals who seek quality, reliability and flair. The company 'purpose' is to "create and transform buildings for people's enjoyment without disrupting their lives".

Andy talked to me about how he runs his 'ship', the people and incidents which have influenced him in his life, and what he considers to be the ethos of good leadership.

Starting in 2001, one of the main goals Snibor aspires to is that they have based themselves in the remit of the hotel industry ie: 5 Star Customer Service. They particularly want their customers to enjoy the building experience while they are on site, so that once they go, the customer will miss them "It is achievable!" explained Andy.

The company does quite a lot of work in the Independent Schools sector and are currently building 14 classrooms using natural ventilation and ground floor heating with very low energy use, for Port Regis Prep School in Dorset.

"A long time ago I used to work with an Irish labourer in London who had worked in the industry for 40 years. After one job, in the pub afterwards during the 'wash up' (an end-of-the-job finish up model, taught at the Leadership Trust) he said 'Beejesus Andy, that was rather a strange job - but it started and it finished!' And, don't they all? What he meant was that it all went through smoothly, and the school job has been very similar".

"The reason for this is due to the team we are working with. No one has an ego, which makes a big difference. The school, ourselves, the architect, subcontractors, suppliers and consultants from Cambridge all work together. It is the Procurement route - the fact that we procured the project right from the start and had a partnership deal with the school, rather than going through the Tender route. This is where projects are really successful for us, when we work with the clients who usually come

through word of mouth"

Using the military principal, Snibor have had a good apprentice programme - one from each trade - over the past 4 to 5 years, and spend a lot of time recruiting apprentices. Applicants go through a group interview, go out with the foreman for 2 days work experience, and the decision is then made as to who to take on. "We have had some really good guys who are very enthusiastic and forthcoming about the company, and we take time to all have lunch together to promote the sense of community around the table. I learnt that from a Colonel of the Paras who was talking about community, and the importance of sitting down and eating together. We



have had particularly good carpenters this year on the apprentice programme who have gone on to do their NVQ3 which gets them into a much better position to do their NVQ4. Apprenticeships have become a really fundamental part of our business"

"The other benefit from apprenticeships is that we all want to leave something behind, don't we? The apprenticeship programme gives the older members of our team a way of passing on their skills when they reach retirement."

There are two parts to the business - Building Projects which uses the contracting side of the business, and Specialist Projects where they use their own labour, working closely with the client having done customer service training in-house. "Personal interaction and social skills are hugely important - that is the kind of experience which people value".

Andy Robins expects a lot from his team and they all work very hard. Although not advocating long working hours, the industry traditionally works long hours anyway. He has spent time putting checks in place to make sure people are performing - like 'split times' with a coach. They have a score card system which gets updated every fortnight, looking at health and safety, customer service and other issues in order to remain aware. The

backbone of the company are their working foremen - site managers - who have all the responsibility for the site, and direct contact with the client. They need to be critical and spend time training and working with the whole team.

"Standards are very important to me" explained Andy. "After leaving the Navy, at 22, where I spent 6 years being on time, I was horrified at the relaxed attitude of the civilian world".

I asked Andy what his biggest leadership challenges were in the building industry. "One of the biggest challenges in this industry is simply 'leadership' itself - training up quality tradesmen to be the next generation's managers and leaders" he said. "Quite a lot of people who join us, do so because of the training aspect. We have a good reputation. People come in who have no idea of management, so a year ago we set up a goal setting system on site - every two weeks the support teams go on site and re-assess the goals. Then everyone in the office can see what is going on for the next fortnight on the site. That's revolutionary for a building site - not only the client can see what is happening, but the whole company is involved. One senior manager really struggled with the goal setting, thinking it

was a waste of time at the beginning. But now he can understand how critical it is, and has made improvements himself in the goal setting, thus making the project run more smoothly"

When Beacon South West was first set up, Snibor was invited to be its first member. Andy says he felt very honoured! "We have a good small network going in this area now - our last Beacon Board Meeting was at Fudges Biscuits, and they came up with something which fits the next step for us in our goal setting. Next we will be visiting them with our Operations team, and the benefits of seeing a different environment, such as this biscuit factory, is that their ways of goal setting, management and leadership skills with their foremen, can show us the next step forward"

"We have been on the UK Enterprise visits that Beacon organise, and other companies open their doors so that we see how they are operating. We also had a Beacon Boardroom at our own site and are keen to let people have a chance to look around. Beacon are talking about setting up their own Academy, and I think we would gain a great deal from this in terms of bringing people from other businesses together. They could be the facilitator for sharing information"

Andy is a great fan of 'The One Minute Manager'

by Kenneth Blanchard and Spencer Johnson, and Snibor's goal setting is based around this technique. "People would be surprised what you can learn from the trades people coming through the industry" explained Andy. "We have been using Gordon Ramsey's kitchen training techniques which tell people very quickly what they have done wrong, what they have done right, and then sets goals for people to achieve."

One of Snibor's greatest strengths is flexibility – and being a small organisation allows for flexibility to happen. They have a culture of 'giving anything a go'. If a client wants something that might be difficult, they will look at different ways in which they can try to accommodate this. "Because we have our own workforce, we can be fairly flexible. We have regular quarterly briefs for our workforce which is essential, especially bearing in mind the current difficult climate".

Andy Robins is a natural optimist though, and the work load at Snibor has actually become very busy of late. His theory rests on 'location, location, location', and he feels that there can be an

advantage when things are difficult for well-run companies to have a chance of surviving. He admits that the next two or three years will be rough and they have to make sure they are being efficient. But, it gives a chance to re-group and look at things more closely, which could result in good opportunities. They have already downsized all their transport, and are looking closely at their plant usage, and wastage on sites to see how that can be reduced.

Andy's 'leadership lesson' came from something his son had learned while competing in the National Prep School Athletics. He came second in the National which was quite an achievement, as he lost by only 2 tenths of a second as well as knocking 12 seconds off the school record. "Our motto in the Field Guns was 'to the limit and beyond', and my son did just that. I told him - 'When you get to the point where your lungs are going to burst, that's where the fun starts, because you know that you can take it further'" Despite his disappointment in not winning the race, Andy's son said that advice was all he could think of as he ran.

Finally, on the Beacon visit to Fudge's factory, Andy explained "The guy at Fudges has a great thing. He talked about the concept of 'Peg and Stretch'. He takes people in the organisation, pegs them out and stretches them – 'if they can't meet the stretch, then put them back', he said. I stretched people too far last year, but they are now back in their slots, more than happy with themselves, because they know they don't want to go there. My son stretched himself way out of his comfort zone, but now he has pegged himself down and will stretch himself again in due course"

www.snibor.co.uk

interview by Vanessa Ascough – Editor



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Carbon footprints and farm businesses

A much heralded new software package, "Carbon Accounting for Land Managers" (CALM) was launched by Environment Secretary Hilary Benn at the agricultural industry's flagship "Oxford Farming Conference" in January 2008. He congratulated the CLA and Savills on the development of the calculator, saying that it was an essential tool which would enable people to put carbon accounting into practice.

However, here in the South West, Duchy College's Rural Business School has already been raising awareness of farm energy use and greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture. Although farming is broadly carbon neutral, thanks to its dependence on photosynthesis of both food and forage crops, it nevertheless accounts for 7% of the total UK greenhouse gas emissions; this is largely through its emissions of other more potent greenhouse gases in the form of methane (21 times more) and nitrous oxide (310 times more).

It was therefore evident that measures taken to decrease greenhouse gas emissions and increase carbon sequestration, could have a significant impact on reducing the UK greenhouse gas emissions, in line with the Kyoto agreement. With large retailers, such as Marks and Spencer, stating their intention to become carbon neutral companies, carbon accountability was seen as likely to become increasingly important as a measure of environmental performance to customers.

For farmers to be able to decide on, and monitor

changes, it was felt that an audit tool would be necessary. In early 2007, the "Forum for the Future" had already produced a suitable spreadsheet audit tool, based on UK and international research data, capable of establishing the carbon footprint of dairy farm enterprises.

Dairy farms are mainly small businesses, which in early 2007 had been under severe financial pressures for the preceding five years, because of increasing exposure to lowered world prices following the reduction in support from the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. These had been so severe that returns precluded reinvestment in the majority of businesses. There was also the threat to the industry posed by having to restructure to meet the requirements of the EU's Water Framework Directive – hardly the time to introduce carbon footprinting!

The approach taken was to introduce the concept through on-farm energy efficiency, which has an obvious significance for relatively high energy consumers, such as the milk producers, because of the need to heat washing water and cool milk. Dairy farmers were shown that energy saving measures produced a significant financial saving, and furthermore would have a tangible environmental benefit. This proved a successful introduction to the subject, as shown through seven farmer events held across the South West, supported by the Farm Energy Centre and the Institute for Grassland and Environmental Research, involving over 180 dairy farmers.



Businesses provided data including livestock, land, use of manures, electricity, transport fuels and renewable energy. The spreadsheet tool enabled dairy farmers to examine their farm's energy use and greenhouse gas emissions, with the aim of pinpointing where cost savings and changes could be made through nutrient substitution and reduction in gas emissions and water pollution.

The main energy saving practices identified were through more efficient heating and cooling systems, and the main factors affecting greenhouse gas emissions were livestock waste management, followed by fertiliser use. The effects of changing practices could be estimated.

As with all benchmarking tools, there is a balance between simplicity to encourage use and sufficient detail to work on meaningful guidelines. The tool enabled farmers to implement useful changes on-farm, but inclusion of carbon footprints on bought-in materials eg: feeds, seeds and fertiliser, would create a more accurate overall picture of whole systems, as recommended by the Carbon Trust i.e. "Life Cycle Analysis". This is, however, much more complex, as reflected in the fact that the CALM software has been launched, but is not yet quite ready for general use!

For more information, go to www.cornwall.ac.uk, and click on Duchy College

