

Training & Employment

Professionals take a prospective look at trades in the construction sector

Trades in the French construction sector seem to be heading towards a period of stability, if only because buildings are made to last for a long time and therefore require the use of methods which have proved their worth over the years and that of traditional renovation techniques. These trades have been changing increasingly fast, however, due to the industrialisation of the sector and the development of novel building materials and increasingly sophisticated technical equipment. Construction professionals' sense of identity therefore sometimes seem to be torn between tradition and modernity. In order to avoid following trends which might lead to either the disappearance of valuable inherited know-how or the inability to make use of the latest materials and technological developments, professionals therefore have to start looking ahead at what is to become of this sector's trades. Because of the objectives now being assigned to the construction industry in terms of environmental control, it has become increasingly crucial to address this question.

From the start of the 1970s up to the year 2000, the image of trades in the French construction industry, which used to be tinged with nostalgia for the golden age of long ago, seems to have become rather discredited. These trades, which have often been regarded as relics of the old-fashioned masons' trades, no longer form the basis of vocational diplomas. These developments can be illustrated in the following two ways: by looking at how the names of the vocational diplomas have changed and how the numbers of sub-commissions constituting the consultative occupational commissions (CPCs: see the note on page 2) have decreased.

The names of the specialities in this field have been lengthening, and no longer include the traditional occupational terms. As far as construction activities themselves are concerned, some new generic terms such as "constructors" "fitters" and "installers" have emerged: terms such as "assemblers of heating equipment at building sites" are being used instead of "kitchen and bathroom plumbers", "masonry and reinforced concrete assemblers" instead of "masons"; and "reinforced concrete builders for public works" instead of concrete workers.

The number of sub-commissions in each of the CPCs has decreased (there were 12 in the late 70s) and each one covers an increasingly wide range of occupational fields. Initially, the CPC responsible for construction and public works at the French Ministry of Education no doubt decided to decrease the number of sub-commissions as part of the new approach to the sector's activities, which were to be arranged in five main functional groups: structural frameworks, technical equipment, fittings and fixtures, finishings, and public works. However, things developed in such a way that the trade representatives were eventually replaced by representatives of the construction sector. This CPC now includes only two sub-commissions. At the French Ministry of Employment, the CPC responsible for construction and public works used to have many sub-commissions. In 1985, there were still thirty-two of them. The fact that this number was reduced to only four specialised national commissions after the turn of the century is felt by the social partners to be the reason why it has become so difficult to discuss the content of vocational qualifications.

During this whole period, which was marked by the weakening of the whole concept of trades in this sector, other concepts such as those of occupational fields and competences began to emerge (see the inset on page 2). These concepts correspond to a picture of the relationship between training and employment which stems from the ministries and the firms in the sector, and this has therefore contributed to occupational logics being replaced by institutional logics in the setting up of qualifications.

Towards new ideas as to what trades involve

Although the question of trades never entirely disappeared from the scene because the tradition of guildry was so strongly implanted in the construction sector, it seems to have come to the fore again from the 1990s onwards. This led to the emergence of ●●●

The **consultative occupational commissions (Commissions professionnelles consultatives - CPC)** are composed of representatives of employers, employees, the public authorities and other qualified persons. These commissions are requested to give advice about the creation, the updating or the abolition of vocational qualifications.

The **qualifications** referred to here are all those delivered by the French ministry of Education, and the French ministry of Employment.

••• apprenticeship training qualifications called the vocational "brevet" and this fairly complete, coherent set of vocational certificates provided a valid alternative to the existing vocational baccalauréats. When all the CAP certificates in the construction sector were reformed in 2000, the sector's organisations took the opportunity of drawing up occupational standards describing the activities involved in much more concrete terms than previously. For example, the ability to "apply and carry out" which featured in the certification standards relating to the CAP certificate in Roofing was replaced in 1988 by a list of the eight main skills involved. In 2000, forty skills describing the abilities acquired by those obtaining the CAP certificate in Roofing were listed.

The idea therefore seems to have persisted that people's occupations serve to define them in the context of their work, but new emphasis was being placed on the need for operational know-how to be set up and recognized.

The new emphasis on trades is not without some ambiguity, since the work context has undergone some fundamental changes during the last few years. Some employers have been using it to rather devious ends when recruiting workers for unskilled jobs. It certainly seems to be the case, however, that trades are indispensable for anchoring people to their work via the culture and the identity they mediate, as well as for assessing forthcoming changes. Trades are a familiar concept which can be used by professionals to build a picture of the future. If we want to prevent this concept from being too hazy and from conveying nothing but nostalgic memories of the past, its rehabilitation must involve some concertation between the professionals involved in redefining what trades involve.

The "Association ouvrière des compagnons du devoir du tour de France" (AOCDTF: the Association of Companion Workers committed to travelling round the whole of France) has created higher occupational institutes where groups have been set up to examine "the future for occupations". We therefore naturally consulted this Association as part of our study on trades (see the inset on page 4). It is working at present on the following two main lines: investigating the culture and images associated with the construction trades and identifying the skills involved in these trades; and analysing the trends at work in society and their impact on trades. By discussing these two topics separately, it was possible to examine the question of present-day occupational identity before dealing with what the future holds in store.

Skills are central to people's sense of occupational identity

There exist some prejudices about occupational skills. Since these skills are the fruit of everyday practice and are gradually perfected as the result of individuals' personal experience, and since they are difficult for outside observers to analyse, they tend to be assimilated to a set of routine manual gestures. Actually, however, they call on all the qualities of those who have acquired them, including their intellectual and psychomotor abilities, their senses and their emotions. Skills are not merely a lower form of intellectual knowledge, but part of a knowledge acquisition process based on experience. On these lines, skills have been defined as knowledge acquired in action, in close contact with experts in the trade, knowledge resulting from experience, which is regularly reinterpreted, and which also mediates a culture and an occupational identity.



Occupational fields and competences: concepts which do not replace traditional occupational images

Occupational fields: focusing on the acquisition of general technological knowledge

In the mid-80s, the French Ministry of Education reformed its system of occupational qualifications and the concept of occupational fields was used to arrange qualifications in groups involving the acquisition of similar academic and technological knowledge. The enlarged perimeters of the jobs to which these qualifications were intended to lead cover several economic sectors of activity, based on the idea that the specific know-how required in each particular job can always be learned during the period of adaptation following an employee's recruitment.

Competence: a useful means of defining company policy

The concept of competence, as defined by the National Council of French Heads of Firms (le Conseil national du patronat français - CNPF) at the international meeting on vocational training which took place in Deauville in 1998, provides a useful human resources tool. It can be used to optimise the balance between the competences required for a given position at a firm and those actually acquired by an employee. Competences, which have been said to constitute a new model for qualifications, depend closely on the currently adopted mode of work organisation.

How might it be possible to arrange a programme of exchanges enabling professionals to review the skills specifically involved in their trades? Based on previous studies and interviews with professionals from the construction sector, as well as several published works and papers, twelve specific skills were defined (see the inset). This typology was used to carry out a series of collective interviews.

The professionals interviewed described their skills, pointed out the special features of their trades, and explained how these trades had evolved with time. The table listing the various aspects of the skills in question, which was drawn up after analysing these interviews, shows the differences between the various trades.

“Perceiving and feeling” and “adapting to the material and the situation” are aspects of which roof-builders and stone-hewers proved to be highly aware. The former also stressed the importance of “adjusting and correcting”, whereas the latter tended to focus more on “imagining how operations were planned”.

Like roof-builders and stone-hewers, carpenters gave priority to “adapting to the material and the situation”, but they also opted for two other aspects: “imagining how operations are planned”, et “cooperation and team-work”.

Plumbers, like roof-builders, felt “adjusting and correcting” to be an important aspect, but they also placed as much importance on “discussing the work with customers”.

Metal-workers viewed their work as part of a process involving other specialists: they gave priority to “grasping the situation” and “imagining how operations were planned”.

Plasterers expressed the feeling that the most important aspect was “producing carefully executed work with a tasteful finish”: *“Our aim is to do a professional, well-finished job. It’s a matter of what it looks like, not how long it takes. It’s a question of doing one’s job properly, taking a critical look at what one is doing... We have a sense of harmony and an expert eye. Whether we have used plasterboard, traditional plaster or staff, the result must be pleasing to the eye”. In fact, even if something is crooked, that won’t matter at all as long as it looks straight” (one of the plasterers participating).*

The latter aspect actually emerged from the discourse of all the professionals, who also stressed the obstacles preventing them from deploying their skills to the full. They said they regretted not being able to do top quality work and mentioned their conflicts with the company managers and how much they valued the standards of the traditional crafts. On the other hand, they said that they unfortunately

Twelve aspects of know-how

1. Perceiving and feeling: being endowed with gestural intelligence, bodily knowledge, and agility involving sensory mobilisation.
2. Adapting to the material and the situation: being familiar with the materials used, their qualities and their limitations; having the knack of making the best possible use of various natural materials.
3. Adjusting and correcting: the ability to intervene during the production process and to cope with any incidents by calling on the practical experience acquired.
4. Creating and adapting the tools required: awareness of the details which make an instrument efficient and being able to make improvements.
5. Producing a professional job with a good finish: tending towards perfection and a sense of style.
6. Being able to cooperate and work in a team: coordinating one’s work with that of other people and helping others to accomplish their work.
7. Grasping the situation: having an overall picture of the worksite. Understanding the purpose of the building and acting accordingly: not doing anything out of key.
8. Imagining the various stages involved in each operation: anticipating the forthcoming stages so as to intervene as appropriately as possible.
9. Discussing the job with customers: being able to understand customers’ expectations and provide them with relevant information.
10. Discussing the work with other professionals: understanding the viewpoints of other tradesmen involved and exchanging ideas; expressing one’s opinion.
11. Perfecting and innovating: evolving, trying to progress, always learning new things.
12. Learning and sharing: handing on one’s know-how to others.

no longer had the same feeling for their tools, and they only fleetingly mentioned the aspect “creating and adapting one’s tools”. Know-how of the kind which mobilises the physical senses, requires expert knowledge and fine handling of materials is still part of these people’s representation of their trade, but exchanges with people in other occupations and trying out new technical solutions are gradually becoming more important.

These professionals were not indifferent to the latest changes: they said they had difficulty in adapting to them and regrets because it is not only the skills and habits that are changing, but also the values which went along with them. It is not just the work itself that is changing but the actual meaning of the work.

A prospective approach to future trades

After these interviews with professionals, some discussions were organized about current social trends and their impact on occupations. These discussions were run on the basis of the factors previously identified by the AOCDTF Companions’ College, namely the cultural and social, legislative, economic, organisational, technological and demographic factors involved.

These discussions led to defining what services customers are expecting nowadays, how the

Further reading

- *“Le désir de métier : engagement, identité et reconnaissance au travail”* (The occupational urge: commitment, identity and recognition at work), F. Osty, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2003.
- *“Refaire son métier. Essai de clinique de l’activité”* (Making an new occupational start. An essay in the field of work clinics), J.-L. Roger, Édition ERES, 2007.
- *“Le sens du travail. Chronique de la modernisation au guichet”* (The significance of work. A chronicle of cash desk modernisation), F. Hanique, ERES, Sociologie clinique, March 2004.
- *“La sagesse du potier”* (The potter’s philosophy), J. Girel, Paris, L’oeil neuf éditions, collection « Sagesse d’un métier », 2004.
- *“Tu seras choumac”* (You’re going to be a cobbler), R. Maroli, Paris, Librairie du compagnonnage, 1978.

market is functioning and what changes the latest construction processes have brought about.

Customers are now expecting higher standards of comfort and cleanliness. They are better informed, are making new demands in terms of preventive maintenance, and attach great importance to the choice of fittings, depending on what is available and on the costs. Customers are increasingly aware of the need to save energy, to preserve natural resources and to enjoy healthy surroundings.

The construction market is undergoing many changes. The cost of manpower has increased, and the work involved in preparing bids for tender has increased. Stricter deadlines are also having to be met at building sites.

The range of building materials and equipment available has increased tremendously, and industrial firms have developed strategies involving products combined with services which have been pushing craftsmen out of work. Buildings now have to meet a large number of highly demanding standards.

Companies are having to adapt to the new context and are expecting their employees to possess new competences in terms of technological and legal intelligence, strict compliance with legally imposed procedures, the ability to supervise one's own work, etc. The preoccupations expressed by these professionals at the meeting initiated by the occupational institutes reflected more than just the need to adapt their occupations to the changing pattern of society.

The work of the occupational institutes did not go beyond assessing the impact of various social trends on occupations. But the group dealing with "the future for trades" expressed the wish to pursue these investigations by beginning to formulate some strategic goals. The Companions certainly want to participate actively in shaping tomorrow's occupations. The objectives recently adopted at the Grenelle conference on the environment have made it necessary to redefine relations with customers, building system design, the choice and use of materials and commercial practices. Professionals in the construction industry will have to produce suitable responses matching the latest contours of the construction sector, and these will have many repercussions on employment and qualifications. It will therefore be worth continuing the debates mentioned above.

The question of trades has come to the fore during a period of change which has led professionals to question the significance of their work and their occupational identity because of the tendency towards privatisation,

Methods and aims of the survey

The article presented in this issue was based on a survey conducted by Céreq in 2006 on the French State Education's diplomas and the occupational qualifications delivered by the Ministry of Employment. The aim was to assess these qualifications objectively and critically. At the same time, it suggests some possible lines on which to orient the future activities of the occupational institutes founded by the Association ouvrière des compagnons du devoir du tour de France (AOCDTF). This non-profit association caters for 15 000 companions with 25 different trades. By founding these occupational institutes, the Association provided its members with a meeting-point, a place where the history of their occupations is recorded and a centre for research and vocational training designed to help tradesmen look ahead while complying with the fundamental values of companionship: hospitality, the traditional trade, journeying, the companions' community, and the transmission of skills.

This survey was carried out at the six institutes corresponding to the construction industry's occupations, namely those responsible for frame-building and timber work, plasterwork, metalwork in the construction industry, roof-building, stoneworking and plumbing and air conditioning.

Two group interviews lasting 3h30 with six to twelve people were carried out on each occupation: most of the participants were heads of firms, tradesmen and employers. A few trainers, suppliers' representatives and heads of occupational organisations were also present. The first interview was designed to identify the know-how characteristic of each trade, and the aim of the second one was to determine how these occupations are evolving. Each of the themes addressed was accompanied by a slide show, which was used as an introduction and to guide the discussions.

the increasingly strong competition, the development of services to customers, the emergence of new types of clientele, and the increasingly unstable conditions of employment. Many traditional occupations are in a state of crisis, whereas the professionalisation of new occupations is still rather a shaky, incomplete process. It is to be hoped that occupational groups will be able to continue working to overcome the difficulties involved in ensuring that occupations will survive as well as becoming more up to date.

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Further reading

- "*Décrire les métiers. Les savoir-faire de différents métiers du bâtiment et leur évolution*" (Describing occupations. The know-how associated with various occupations in the construction industry and how they are changing), P. Kalck, Céreq, NEF n°27, 2008.
- "*La révolution des métiers*" (The occupational revolution), coordinated by F. Piotet, Paris, PUF, Le lien social, 2002.

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