

# QA system brings benefit

**RMC is finding that carefully installed quality assurance is helping it compete in a rapidly changing world.**

Traditional ways of working in construction involved meeting a client's specifications while under



*Quality control checks on finished surface samples at RMC's NAMAS accredited laboratory*

his supervision and may have induced a false sense of security among contractors.

Now things have changed. "It appeared to be easier in those days," says Ken Tredgett, Operations Manager of RMC Surfacing's Southern Region. "Our responsibilities were often simply perceived as the provision of specified materials based on a recipe approach and the carrying out of the works.

"Our customer would point out anything that he was not happy about and we would discuss what had gone wrong or was additional to what was specified. Rightly, those days are gone and today we have to take responsibility for our own performance as well as shoulder a greater burden of risk. This has been a big culture shock for some companies."

Customers, whether privately financed roads operators or the public sector, no longer expect to

have to keep watch over their suppliers' shoulders every step of the way, and want their contractors in particular to bear the full mantle of responsibility for their own actions.

Contracting is a higher risk game than ever before and the only way to ensure survival in this market is to be sure that you are doing the right thing, first time every time. That means Quality Assurance, says RMC.

"Those who already have a quality system should be well positioned to compete today, but those who don't or who only pay lip service to it will eventually be found out," says RMC Aggregates Divisional Technical Manager Gordon Lemon.

"New and innovative surfacing materials are being introduced and now that we have moved away from the old recipe based specifications, clients need to be

certain that they are not going out on a limb when they select these new products. Having quality assured production and surfacing is the only way they can be sure the materials are designed well and put in place properly."

"RMC has fully committed itself to quality assurance (QA) but this does not appear to be the case with all surfacing contractors and we regularly see surfacing operations in progress by companies who obviously do not have a quality scheme," says Ken Tredgett.

"There are costs associated with QA particularly in its early stages and it is therefore sometimes difficult to demonstrate its advantages when work has been lost on competitive tender.

"It may be time for our clients to require that surfacing operations have mandatory quality schemes similar to those imposed by the Highways Agency for road markings or for the supply and erection of safety fences.

"As long as QA is not mandatory, competitive tendering will not be on an equal basis."



*Quality assured production and surfacing is ensuring that RMC produces the right result, first time everytime.*

**Main customer benefit is genuine assurance of quality**

There has been talk of regulation which will ensure that only those with QA will be allowed to tender for major contracts, but there is no clear sign of it yet. Customers are gradually incorporating QA as a requirement in tenders but RMC is still disappointed at the slow take up by clients.



A common quality system is expected to be in operation next year covering asphalt production, but RMC says this requirement needs to be extended to the contractors who lay the material.

RMC Surfacing went to considerable pains to institute its QA scheme. From initial idea to full accreditation for the first of the company's regions, the south west, took two years of hard work.

All surfacing companies in RMC now have third party QA in accordance with ISO 9000, using BSI as the accreditation body. All routine operations are covered by it and major projects have their individual Quality Plans drawn up in accordance with the certified scheme.

"We were already doing almost everything that is required by QA," remembers Ken Tredgett, who is also the company's Quality Manager for the southern region. "If your QA is designed around your existing systems then the task is all the more manageable, but even so it was hard work."

A heavy investment was made in training to ensure that everybody knew what they had to do to comply with the quality assurance procedures.

These cover everything from receipt of a customer enquiry through the surfacing operation

to liaison with the client and after-care.

QA was at first a new thing to most staff, but is now routine, an integral part of all the company's systems. When new people join they can be slotted in quickly as the QA system tells them exactly what they should do. QA is now the norm.

A key part of the procedure is a contract review meeting with the client before the work starts.

This has been found to minimise the need for claims. Work instructions are issued by the Quality Manager which detail what needs to be done and how. Foremen and supervisors inspect and record every step of the work. "That all means a lot of paperwork but it means that people physically check the work they have done," says Ken. "Nevertheless, it is a simple, user friendly system that works." QA extends to the sub contractors used by RMC and any found wanting are taken off the company's approved list.

Getting the manual together was the hardest part of the task and the use of an outside consultant was essential to ensure everybody kept to the deadlines they had agreed.

There have been several successes for the QA system's ability to act as an early detection for on site problems. Ken explains: "A pattern emerged of Hot Rolled Asphalt in one region failing adjacent to the longitudinal joint. Having spotted this pattern we were able to quickly assess what was going wrong and take remedial action before our customer had reason to complain.

"It was a simple fault which had crept into a particular gang and it was soon put right. In essence, our procedures now provide us with an early warning system that will spot problems before they become complaints."

*Density testing, measuring texture and checking the quality of ride on an RMC resurfacing project*

