

After 28 Years, Fire Safety Leader Graham Lowe Retires: An Industry Retrospective

2 years ago



For nearly three decades, Graham Lowe has been a guiding force in fire safety, serving as Managing Director of Hochiki Europe. Now, as he steps into retirement, Lowe offers a unique perspective on the remarkable transformations within the fire detection industry and how Hochiki Europe has strategically adapted to stay at the forefront. In this interview, Lowe shares his insights and thoughts for the future not only for the team at Hochiki but also the broader industry.

Over your tenure at Hochiki Europe, what are some of the most significant changes you have witnessed in the fire safety industry?

For those in the UK fire safety industry, the single most impactful change in recent years was undoubtedly the introduction of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, or simply, the Fire Safety Order. Implemented on October 1st, 2005, this legislation established a robust framework for fire safety regulation across all non-domestic premises in England and Wales. This includes workplaces and the shared areas of multi-occupied residential buildings.

The Order places the onus squarely on the “responsible person” – typically the building owner, employer, or whoever has control of the premises – to ensure fire safety compliance. This marked a significant shift from the previous reliance on annual inspections by the local fire brigade. Responsible persons now have full legal accountability for fire safety within their buildings.

The impact on the fire industry was immediate, and at the time we saw a surge in demand from customers during the year of implementation. Notably, there was a noticeable move away from fire detection products being sold directly over the counter. Instead, the focus shifted towards specialist fire alarm

installers and integrators who possess the expertise to design and implement compliant fire safety systems.

This reform transformed the industry, placing a greater emphasis on professional fire safety solutions and risk management strategies.

What are you most proud of accomplishing during your time as MD at Hochiki Europe?

During my tenure as Managing Director, I'm most proud of building a strong Senior Management Team. This team brings together the experience, expertise, and skills needed to propel Hochiki Europe forward.

The team has an exceptional sense of teamwork, which is crucial for the company's continued development and success. Strong communication is central to our team's operations, and it's reinforced by a clear mission statement and four key pillars that guide our growth:

- Expansion: Strategically growing our market reach and influence.
- Efficiency: Continuously improving our operations to optimise performance.
- Value Addition: Delivering exceptional value to our customers and partners.
- Employee Engagement: Fostering a positive and motivating work environment for our team.

One of the most important things we've done and will continue to do as a senior team is to invest in the company's future. The acquisition of Apex House was a goal I'd been working towards for several years, and it facilitates further investment in our Gillingham production infrastructure. This will allow us to even better serve our customers in the UK, Europe, Middle East, India and Africa delivering innovative fire safety solutions.

What challenges have you faced leading Hochiki Europe over the years, and how did you and the team overcome them?

My tenure as MD hasn't been without its challenges, but two major events stand out. The first was Brexit. Leaving the European Union ushered in a period of uncertainty, with new procedures and legal issues that continue to evolve. While Brexit presented its own set of hurdles, nothing could have prepared us for the unprecedented global crisis that followed: the COVID-19 pandemic.

This pandemic had a profound impact on every aspect of our lives, with staff facing personal and professional difficulties. As a business, the most immediate challenge was the complete disruption of supply chains globally. Manufacturers around the world faced issues sourcing third-party products and group-manufactured goods to securing essential electronic components, everything was affected. Shipping delays became the norm, further complicating business' ability to meet production demands.

For Hochiki, overcoming these obstacles required a collective effort. Strong teamwork and clear communication were essential between the management team and staff. Our HR department played a pivotal role in ensuring the health and safety of all employees during the pandemic.

However, our focus wasn't solely internal. We understood the importance of transparency with our customers. We kept them informed of the ever-changing situation, the actions we were taking to mitigate disruptions, and when they could expect resolutions. This open communication fostered trust and helped

us maintain strong relationships throughout this challenging period and indeed has established a way of working that we continue to foster today.

How has Hochiki Europe adapted to meet the evolving needs of its customers across the UK, Europe, the Middle East, India and Africa?

Hochiki Europe is committed to providing exceptional support to our customers around the world. That's why we made strategic investments years ago in establishing Hochiki Middle East, Hochiki India Branch Office, and Hochiki Italia. These entities allow us to deliver enhanced local support, expand our reach to new customers, and ultimately, fuel global growth.

This revision highlights the positive outcomes of the investments for Hochiki Europe's customers. It emphasises the company's proactive approach to international support and the resulting growth opportunities.

Do you have any plans to stay involved in the fire safety industry in any capacity?

I have no doubt that I will retain my interest in the fire safety industry as it will be difficult after forty years in the industry to let that association go.

What advice would you give to young professionals interested in a career in fire safety?

My advice to young professionals entering the fire industry is this: it's a secure and standards-driven field with consistent demand. However, to truly thrive, staying updated on the latest developments is crucial. Consider specialising in a specific area to become an expert.

That's why Hochiki Europe is heavily invested in the future of the fire industry through the Hochiki Training Academy. The Academy provides ongoing education and training opportunities, ensuring our industry colleagues have the knowledge and skills to excel.

The fire safety industry offers not only stability but also the profound satisfaction of protecting lives and property. By constantly improving fire safety measures, we contribute to the well-being of communities worldwide. Our hope is that the Hochiki Training Academy empowers individuals to become valuable assets in achieving this essential goal.

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience at Hochiki Europe?

Looking back on my over 28 years at Hochiki Europe, it's been an incredibly rewarding journey. I started as a Regional Sales Manager and steadily progressed to the role of Managing Director. This experience has fostered immense personal and professional growth.

One of the greatest privileges of my career has been collaborating with our diverse team, a true Hochiki family. Together, we've had the opportunity to work alongside exceptional customers from all over the world, across different cultures. This cross-cultural collaboration has been a source of immense pride and learning.

And finally... What are you most looking forward to in your retirement?

Retirement promises exciting new beginnings. I'm looking forward to tending to my garden and pottering in the greenhouse, enjoying quality time with my wife and family, and hopefully fitting in some regular rounds of golf. After 50 years of dedicated work, it's time to unwind and relish this well-deserved chapter.

On Thursday 13th June, Graham was presented with a tree to commemorate his service to the industry which he chose to plant at Hochiki Europe headquarters in Gillingham, Kent. The whole of the Hochiki Europe team, and we're sure the wider fire industry, would like to wish Graham all the best in his well-deserved retirement, which officially begins on 27th June 2024. Mr Shinsuke Kubo, who was promoted to Managing Director in July of last year, will now fully take over the reins for Hochiki Europe.