

Suzan shares vision of high-tech growth built off-site

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Episode 2:
Behind Gratte Brothers Limited

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The building services industry can fire up growth by taking advantage of digital tools and processes, and by making better use of off-site assembly, according to the head of one of the sector's largest firms.

Remi Suzan, the newly appointed managing director of Gratte Brothers Limited, told [a podcast](#) hosted by the [Building Engineering Services Association](#) (BESA), that it was a positive development that more M&E firms were taking on the role of principal contractor on major projects in high tech sectors like data centres where building services accounts for an increasing proportion of the value.

However, he cautioned firms about the need to find staff that could understand the different aspects of the role and said Gratte Brothers had actively recruited more expertise in construction, structural and architectural engineering "to take ownership" of the responsibility.

"That was a bit of a lesson for us in that you've got some very good M&E project managers, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they can build staircases etc," he told BESA chief executive David Frise who hosts the podcast '[Behind the Built Environment](#)'.

"In terms of risk, so long as you are managing the process and you are not making any mistakes in that side of things, the risk is the same. If I'm main contractor and you're working as a sub-contractor, if that job goes off the rails, then you're all in the lifeboats together. It's no different," said Suzan.

Repeat business

He added that he was optimistic about the future of the company which was benefitting from a high level of repeat business.

"We're taking on projects that we would never have taken on 10, 15 years ago in terms of build content,"

he said. "We've learned our lessons along the way, and we seem to have quite happy clients behind us."

He said the industry could also make better use of digital technologies to help improve quality, productivity, and project delivery, but said there were some problems with how BIM was deployed.

"The concept of BIM is brilliant. The idea to digitally build something before you take it to site is a brilliant idea, but it doesn't work," said Suzan. "It costs an absolute fortune. That's because people don't put in the level of detail needed."

However, he said M&E firms were better at providing the level of complex design information required [to make BIM effective], and the rest of the construction supply chain needed to catch up.

"Until the rest of the industry catches up with the M&E, and they really do model what they're going to install [that's when] you'll see the benefit," he said.

Off-site assembly, on the other hand, was already proving highly effective in improving workflows and working conditions, he said. Gratte Brothers operates two off-site facilities and is currently delivering between 30 and 40% of projects that way – with the aim of raising that to 80%.

"We're making all sorts of things [off site] from full electrical risers to distribution boards, to mechanical pipework, pump skids, but we do it all with our own labour...there's no de-skilling," he said. "People have argued that you could save money, but then that's where you drop off on the quality side of things."

He added that off-site production reduced material waste and speeded up the production of many building services modules. It also improved co-ordination of project delivery for clients.

Massive change

This kind of progression could also help contractors cope with the "massive change" being brought about by the Building Safety Act, added Suzan.

He said the construction industry should "should hang its head in shame" that politicians had to step in and "actually tell us how to build things", but said it was now down to companies to make sure their entire supply chains were competent and capable of delivering quality work that complied with the new safety legislation.

Frise suggested that the whole future of the design & build approach was now in question as contractors were required to produce more design detail before projects would be allowed to go ahead.

[The BESA podcast](#) also addressed the industry's skills gap. Suzan blamed the historic recruitment shortfall on competitive tendering, which resulted in less investment in training because of the pressure it puts on budgets. He also said the industry didn't help itself by "focusing entirely on the academic".

"Basically, if you want a career in this industry now, you have to have...a master's degree," he told Frise. "When they come out of university, these graduates are more focused on design [and lack the practical knowledge and experience of previous generations]."

Gratte Brothers has sought to address this through its four-year graduate trainee programme, which allows apprentices to work in different parts of the business. They bring "buildability skills" to the design team and an understanding of some of the practical elements that academia does not cover like project and

labour management.

The full podcast recording is available [here](#) and for more information about the Building Safety Act visit the [BESA HUB](#).