

Moisture Study

A newsletter on moisture-related issues with concrete slabs.

Volume 1 | No. 8 | October 2012

A story from my life in this industry.

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A Story from the CEO of Advanced Moisture Control, Inc.

It has been nearly 20 years since I entered this industry. Much has changed, but some things never do.

Moisture has been said to be the "biggest problem in the floor covering industry". Articles, ideas, publications and come-and-gone products go back 50 years. The amazing part is so many Americans have been "vapor victims" in an age of technology. Two products don't chemically get along, and moisture exacerbates it. That is the simple answer, but the complex question is who owns it?

When I accidentally slipped into this industry, my first surprise was to see that moisture WAS such a problem, after all the floor covering industry has lived with it since day one. Why then is it such a frustrating and misunderstood issue for people who are dealing with it? It didn't make sense to me until one night in Cleveland.

I have had the blessing of being a guest-speaker at several CSI and WFCMA chapters across America. The Hawaiian invitation of course was nui da kine, but I learned the most in front of an American Concrete Institute chapter dinner meeting in Ohio many years ago..

It was a crowded room, typical of any seminar or lecture on moisture and floors, and not because of who is presenting. Many good people present on this topic. Before I could start my presentation a gentleman near the front of the room growled to the effect, "So YOU... are going to tell US... why floors fail on concrete, HUH?"

I had not yet spoken a word and being surprised by the ambush I instinctively answered him, by saying in my thick Southern Californian accent, "Well Duh, don't glue plastic sheets over wet, alkaline concrete, it don't stick dude!..... [dead silence] Okay, goodnight!" Thank goodness for an icebreaker.

When the audience finally composed themselves, a woman near the front rows then asked a serious question, "But WHY, is this such a big problem?" This was the right question.

Indeed, they were the ACI after all. So as I told them, "Look, I am not a concrete expert and as it turns out, the stuff is so complex, nobody else in this room really is either..." As I recall, the folks at the dinner meeting laughed at that joke back then, and agreed. So if any of my competitors need to email me or post blogs to claim they are experts in concrete and have a special product, save the bandwidth. There is no admixture or simple solution.

Concrete is allegedly the most chemically complex substance humankind has ever created, and we live most of our life on top

of it. But if a floor fails to stick to it, it may be the most expensive thing you'll ever have to pay for, without being able to drive it or live inside it. Really.

When the lady asked that question, it was obvious that everyone in the concrete industry knows slabs are damp, alkaline and can be disagreeable with floor materials. That is not some kind of mystery. The problem really is WHY has it always been, and still is today, such a problem for people to address and resolve?

I certainly did a lot of on-the-spot praying when she asked that question. Then the answer came before me in the strangest of ways, in the form of an image of the human brain.

I told the audience, "The reason floor failures are such a big problem is due to the corpus-callosum fiber network of the human brain." And of course this nice, Midwest audience started thinking that bringing a Californian out to speak was a dumb idea... But I continued, "And these fibers allow the rational side of the brain to communicate with the emotional hemisphere. And in men, those fibers don't work very well.....you see....."

Luckily, these smart people chuckled as they saw where this story was going.

"Its the 11th hour of construction, a year has gone by, all of the money is spent, trucks are en route to deliver interior fixtures and furniture, and completion is on the way. The floor MUST be put down now, and suddenly, there is a sub-contractor who ran a moisture test and is now waiving around a piece of paper like a madman asking the General, Architect and Owner to "sign-off" on the moisture problem, or accept all liability should the floor fail."

The audience was feeling restless, they knew this drill. "The General contractor is usually a guy trying to multitask, red flag number one, but when he is interrupted by the flooring-sub trying to explain their liability issues while he does not understand all the fuss, and nothing was specified to address it, just what kind of reaction do you suppose the floor covering contractor receives? (Or the floor covering industry, for that matter.)

The audience then shouted out every emotional reaction you can imagine, heads nodding, as they have heard it all too, and as concrete people been blamed for it just as often as the flooring people.

"Its your floor problem", "I don't believe the tests", "You are just trying to make more money", "You are just shirking responsibility", and other emotional accusations. And of course the Coup de grâce, "I have never had a moisture problem or a floor failure...".

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Then like an airline disaster, there are cascading events. The initiator is the moisture test that says uh oh. From there, its a contest of will and wit between the parties who don't want to pay anymore money and those who are feeling liability lurching at the door.

We have heard the same all over America. . Its their moisture spec, its their scope of work to fix it. But nothing could be more irrational.

In defense of ALL General Contractors, its not necessarily their problem either. They build the best possible building, with the least amount of cost, and in the shortest period of time. But they cannot control mother nature nor the drying time of concrete either. What they can control is information, and to learn about this phenomena and how to minimize it, how to control it, and how to explain it reasonably to owners who then can make intelligent decisions.

But what really happens is there won't be another dime spent. So rest assured they will use the most inexpensive product they can find, providing it blows enough sunshine you-know-where about being able to "go up to 100 pounds with a 100 year warranty backed by a 100 million dollar liability policy".

What a costly risk to American buildings, and the costly history of that speaks for itself. In my industry, "If something is too good to be true, it just wants your money."

Moisture control of slabs is DANG HARD WORK. The people who do the installation deserve major kudos they seldom ever get. God bless the applicators.

It requires the right kind of capital equipment, the right operators on the job, the right chemical treatments, and the right kinds of procedures with the right type of experience. Mike Rowe if you are reading this, we'll show you some Dirty Jobs.

Moisture control for the long-term protection of flooring or coatings, has never been, and never will be, some kind of magic product solution you just put on and walk away. This is a legal matter of due diligence in the long run. Product choice is critical and application is everything.

My industry of "Concrete Moisture Vapor Emission Control" has been plagued with the simplification of a serious task.

Our worthy competitors will agree with me that proper substrate profiling and product application is paramount to success, despite our differences in product types.

The other competitors we both share who make it sound any easier than that, shouldn't be practicing medicine and give our entire trade group a black eye every time a system fails.

Ultimately, it was our spec-writer who finally coined it perfectly, "Concrete Moisture Vapor Emotion Control".

So where then, does the chain of responsibility start? The Owner of the building also owns the slab moisture condition. Provocative? Refute it then.

If the owner is driving the construction schedule and needs the floor installed sooner than nature allows, then the owner needs to make provision to ensure the compatibility between the two materials (concrete and floor) or allow months for the slab to dry. Otherwise, is the owner not forcing an impossibility?

In my years of experience, I have never once met a building owner who did not understand that simple truth, and was willing to pay for the proper insurance that the floor would not fail. The costs of preemptive treatment are pennies to the costs of a floor system failure. So many owners have said to me, "If I knew about this problem, I would have never risked it."

Our company makes its living sealing the slab for profit. We don't apologize for that, we save people from costs that would have otherwise been catastrophic to them, or may already have been. But our mission and our ministry is to people. Job or not, we care about what people suffer through when trying to understand this problem so they can make intelligent decisions about the options they must face.

In my near 20 years, I have enjoyed the construction industry immensely, and I thank all of you who have met or known me, for the opportunities to have had a chance to help you. It has been a tremendous reward to my life and to my family and our company, even if it has kept me from the beach!

For people reading my message this first time, please bring us your simplest questions or your toughest problems and let my team show you we are the industry's best.

Aloha,

Hank A. Brufflodt, CEO
Advanced Moisture Control, Inc.

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