Things I wish I knew…. **by Charlie McGarvey**
Roof Surveys and Informational Services

It doesn't seem that long ago, but it's been well over 40 years since I first called myself a roofing contractor. However, I had to work for many more years and acquire extensive field experience before I felt comfortable enough to call myself a roofer.

I've been part of the roofing industry's past, with its revolutionary changes in materials, specifications, and opportunities for those who embrace change.

What I learned most by being part of the roofing industry – which is also applicable for any field of employment - is that practical experience is not only the best teacher, it's the foremost way to learn anything of real importance. As a young roofing contractor, I had many questions I couldn't seem to get simple answers to, so I had to learn by experience. Some answers were easy to learn, while others were learned the hard way.

For a roofing contractor starting out, maybe I can offer a shortcut to the answers to a few of my early questions. And with the information, you won't have to learn from experience.

Question #1
With so many liability variables related to being a young roofing contractor, other than becoming a corporation to protect personal assets, how do I learn about staying out of litigation, or at the very least, what questions should I worry about if my company ever becomes involved in litigation?

To answer this question, I made contact with an attorney who specialized in construction law and, at that time, was currently involved with several roofing system litigation cases.

After a one-hour meeting, I left thinking I should immediately go out of business. I was only asking for information about how to possibly stay out of litigation, or at the very least find out what questions I should worry about if my company ever becomes involved in litigation; instead, I only heard horror stories about the costs, what it's like to be questioned during depositions or courtroom appearances, etc.

What I wish the attorney had simply told me:
1) Do your best not to become involved in litigation by solving problems early; however, there will be life circumstances beyond your control - so don't be afraid of litigation, it's just part of today's society.

2) Before starting any roofing project, contact the local building code official and ask whether a construction permit is necessary or not. In some jurisdictions, reroofing over one existing roofing system is considered building maintenance and will not require a permit, but regardless, ask what building codes are used in their jurisdiction. Then order a copy of the code, review each page, ask questions if you don't understand something, and make sure you follow their requirements. Because, whether a permit is required or not, a contractor has a legal responsibility to know and follow all applicable building codes.

3) Never install a roofing system with phrases such as "Best Practices" or "Installed in a Workmanlike Manner", but contact any roofing material manufacturer whose products you install and ask them to forward their installation specifications. Thoroughly read the specifications and only install the materials to their published specifications.

Understand that installing roofing materials to published manufacturer specifications' is a building code requirement – and even if you think that the litigation your involved with may have nothing to do with the installation of roofing materials (e.g. non-payment issues, clogged drains that caused extensive interior water damage, etc.) – your company may not win as a defendant if it can be shown that the roofing materials were not installed to the manufacturer's specifications, and thus the roofing system installation is in violation of the building code.

4) Because it will be a very lonely feeling if you ever end up in a courtroom or facing an arbitration panel by yourself, think about supplying a manufacturer's labor and material warranty for any roofing system you install. While the warranty with all its exclusions may appear to be worthless, it may help confirm that the roofing system was properly installed, but at the very least, you won't be alone in the courtroom or arbitration hearing.

5) After you take the time to become knowledgeable about building code requirements and completely understand roofing material manufacturer installation specifications, then you can have a meeting with an attorney about several different issues, including: company incorporation for personal financial protection; insurance requirements for your specific company needs; and finally, a discussion about contract law. But don't expect an attorney to understand your initial informational needs as a young roofing contractor.

Question #2 –What are Building Codes?
Properly understood and followed, building codes can supply a young roofing contractor with the knowledge to stop a roofing system failure before it occurs, and can become part of a company's professional sales presentation to distinguish your company from all the others.

Without going into the differences, history, and eventual merger of the past three major model-building code organizations, today's modern model-building codes are developed by the International Code Council (I.C.C.), and when released, are commonly referred to as the I-Series Codes.

The I.C.C. updates the codes every three years, which can then be adopted by governing states and municipalities (e.g.,… 2006, 2009, 2012, …). While an understanding of a nationwide basic building code makes it easier to work in different areas, before beginning any work, you must first check with the local code inspector to find out which code year is being enforced and whether individual code addenda have been adopted to meet the requirements of a specific location.

For roofing contractors, the most relevant I-Series codes will be the Commercial, Residential, and Energy codes. Each code book is different and developed by different committees, which may require you to cross-reference wording or phrasing for a proper understanding as it relates to a roofing system installation.
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A word of warning: if you were to order any of the I-Series Code Books and review the various code sections related to roofing systems, you might stop after the first page. Because building codes are written to include different situations and many different types of constructions, the wording and technical information may not be easily understood or found boring to read.

The solution – only order a code book with "commentaries". While not part of any legislatively adopted building codes, commentaries are generally easy-to-read, understandable interpretations of each specific code section. They are used to advise and help a code inspector, or any interested person, to simply understand a code section's intent.

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Question #3 – How do I find answers to questions?

An intelligent young roofing contractor will have numerous questions. Many of which can only be answered by experience, but there are several other ways to gain knowledge and have questions answered – even before you know you have a question.

1) You can begin by ordering and then reading residential and commercial low and steep-slope roofing system manuals, which are then further divided into the installation of different roofing materials. Once you're completed, you'll probably have to start over, as most manuals are updated every few years.

2) You can join the National Roofing Contractors Association (N.R.C.A.) and have access to all types of easy-to-understand technical manuals and answers to questions by just making a phone call.

Moreover, if you're lucky enough to have a local or regional contractors' association, you should join and develop personal relationships, which can be a wealth of knowledge.

3) You can order and begin to read any of several different monthly national construction and roofing industry magazines. Unlike technical manuals and published specifications, trade magazine articles are generally written to be short, easy to read, and easy to understand.

And why would you order general construction magazines unrelated to the roofing industry? Well, if you are correctly installing roofing systems to both building code and manufacturer specifications, you'll soon learn that the vast percentage of call backs for roofing system leakage will not be related to your work, but defects with chimneys; window and doors; siding-stucco; HVAC units; masonry walls; etc.; and these magazines can be a great source of knowledge about problems that may not be found in roofing industry publications.

So, depending on your personality, you may choose any or all of these options, but at the very least, choose one.

Source
Roof Surveys and Informational Services
106 Diane Dr.
Broomall, Pa.
Charles McGarvey
610-587-1384