

A perspective on contemporary lift maintenance

Lift and escalator maintenance is the backbone of the industry but is facing difficult times in the downturn in the economy. Peter Leavers, of Lerch Bates, outlines some of the measures that can be undertaken to regain customer confidence

THE lift industry is essentially split into two business divisions; new equipment and the ongoing maintenance of installed equipment. The new equipment division is driven by the need for volume and technical innovation and the images of gleaming buildings and the excitement of new technologies such as Machine Room Less Lifts, Destination Hall Call control systems and Double Deck lifts have captured industry headlines and employee interest. However the industry survives primarily upon the income it derives from its maintenance and repair activities. This work is the industry's "bread & butter" supporting, as it does,

all the fixed costs of most lift companies' operations and under-pinning their value.

The ability of the industry to deliver high standards of maintenance and the necessary focus required to do that appears to continue to deteriorate year by year.

There appear to be many factors that are influencing this process, including

- a) Corporate pressure for increased returns;
- b) Increased operational costs;
- c) Changes in legislation;
- d) Centralised, process driven cultures.

What is apparent, as a result of cost ▶





pressures within the industry, is that there are signs that some organisations may be seeking to take unfair advantage of clients by finding ways to charge them for every visit made and every repair undertaken regardless of the terms and conditions of the maintenance contract both parties have signed up to.

The difficulty is that, due to the specialist technical nature of the industry, most clients cannot determine the difference between what is chargeable and what should be included within their contract. All too often we have seen examples of where the client is placed in a position where they are forced to pay for work which is, in fact, covered by the contract they have with their maintenance company.

Alongside the price pressures is the shortage of qualified and experienced staff, either through the general lack of training schemes or as a result of cost cutting to support and attain often unrealistic profit objectives. The result is that planned maintenance visits are often cut back in favour of "firefighting" breakdowns etc with the result that the client often gets the worst of all worlds in that fewer visits and less time spent on site will result in the value of the service they thought they had contracted to receive being further eroded.

This erosion will ultimately lead to

poor reliability, reduced availability and the risk that compliance with statutory requirements may even be compromised.

Efficiency improvements with the introduction of Shared Help, usage based maintenance regimes and technology driven routing have also been harnessed to bolster maintenance companies' margins but with little benefit to their customers.

With this backdrop attempts to increase contract prices without corresponding quantitative and qualitative improvements in service is simply going to diminish still further the value of the maintenance service in the eyes of the customer.

In our view there is a need to "get back to basics" when it comes to maintenance and the following would be what we deem important to ensure:

- Maintenance regimes that meet the requirements of the equipment under contract;
- Guaranteed levels of equipment availability with penalties for excessive "downtime";
- Reliable callout response meeting clients (realistic) expectations;
- "Time to Fix" timescales that meet client (realistic) expectations;
- Timely compliance and delivery of safety tests and certificates;

- Clearance of safety defects and confirmation thereof;
- Clear audit trail confirming actual works undertaken on site;
- Risk assessments and method statements that reflect site specific equipment and conditions;
- Open and timely communication.

Many would say that this list is obvious but few industry standard contracts actually offer to meet all of these requirements. Even if your maintenance contract covers all of the above how do you demonstrate proof of delivery?

The industry has, for whatever reasons, had a poor reputation, particularly in relation to the delivery of maintenance and callout services and for its communication with customers generally. The specialist technical nature of the industry makes it difficult for clients to identify what is being delivered and to question the value of what is or is not being provided. It is all too easy for a quick answer, wrapped in technical jargon, to be given and for the real issue of non performance to be avoided.

Reversing the current downward spiral in maintenance services is challenging and needs to be addressed with appropriate knowledge and understanding of the industry. Overall, clients require that their lift and escalator equipment should remain Safe, Reliable, Available, Compliant and Cost-Effective. These are areas that Lerch Bates has focussed on with its Maintenance Management service now covering over 5,000 lifts and escalators in the UK. It is our goal to work with the industry to enable real value to be delivered to the client and to use our knowledge and expertise combined with innovative technological solutions to ensure proof of delivery. 

About the author

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