

Andy Phillips, co-founder of the UK Federation of Countertop Manufacturers: “Cosentino and Caesarstone dominate the UK market”

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In the United Kingdom there are more than 2,000 companies dedicated to the manufacture of countertops. Andy Phillips is the co-founder of the 34-firm Countertop Manufacturers Federation (WFF) , as well as manager of Affordable Granite . We interviewed him to learn about the concerns and demands of the sector.



The UK Worktop Manufacturers Federation (WFF) is open to any UK-based worktop manufacturer who meets certain requirements. Member companies must be UK limited company and VAT registered and have current liability insurance. They must also have an adequate and current health and safety policy and manufacture the countertops in their own workshop using the appropriate machinery.

How did the idea of creating a Federation of UK Worktop Manufacturers come about?

WFF was created by a group of manufacturers, sitting together on a supplier journey and realizing the value of sharing problems and ideas with each other. The biggest problem we face in business management is that we are often alone and that very few entrepreneurs understand the unique problems of our industry. The federation was launched in 2020, but the Covid pandemic brought the construction industry to a standstill, and only in the last 12 months have we started to accelerate our activities.

What is the main Leif motiv?

The WFF tries to come together as an industry and create a professional network. We actively encourage inviting competitors to workshops to showcase the things you are proud of, share your own experiences, and build professional relationships.

WFF exists to provide a forum for all manufacturers and suppliers to come together, exchange ideas and share best practices in an open and constructive manner and in full compliance with Competition Law. In this way, WFF will truly become the voice of our industry, reflecting and addressing the concerns of professional manufacturers to policy makers and industry bodies.

They ensure that their associates adhere to best practices. Which? Currently, best practices are defined by each member company in response to their own work practices and experience, following manufacturers' and health and safety guidelines. One of the reasons the WFF was formed was to share experiences in our industry. The WFF seeks to work with members to bring all this knowledge together to define both a minimum standard and best practice. This will take time and will evolve as work practices and technology change.

What are the issues that concern the manufacturers of countertops and that they debate in the Federation?

Safety is our most important issue, and especially material handling and the hazards of respirable crystalline silica (RCS) dust that is inherent in working with many materials. Attention to these two issues must be at the heart of every fabrication shop and they are constantly discussed.

There is no recognized construction skills certification for stone countertop fabricators to obtain a CSCS skilled worker card to allow them to work on regulated construction sites.

There is also a plethora of materials entering the market, including large-format ceramics, sintered stones, and a resurgence of quartzites and exotic marbles. Each of these has different requirements and production limitations. By sharing expertise, members can increase the chances that jobs will go right the first time and that clients will be satisfied with the result. It is also passing information to specifiers and designers to help them select the most appropriate materials and design.

What projects are you currently working on together?

We have produced a material guide that is being distributed to showrooms and consumers to help them understand what they are buying and make informed design decisions.

We are working with a training provider to prepare a CITB-recognized skills certification course for workers (fitting staff and staff). We hope to launch this in 2023.

We are also compiling a guide to best practice standards that we will refine as a community and use as a resource to drive improvements across the industry.

We also host national and regional meetings to allow manufacturers to come together to exchange ideas and hear presentations on training, safety, machinery, and best practices.

What agreements have you been able to reach with manufacturers through the WFF?

Several material and machinery manufacturers and suppliers have kindly sponsored the WFF, allowing us to cover our start-up and administrative costs. We are not a purchasing group, and the WFF does not intend to interfere in the business relationship between members and their suppliers, but rather to promote collaboration to improve our industry.

As the WFF grows, we look to offer more partnerships and discounts with providers of health and safety training and consulting and other relevant professional services.

What general characteristics would you say the countertop manufacturers sector has in the United Kingdom?

Most UK hob fabricators are small family businesses employing less than 20 people and working in their local area installing 10-20 cookers a week with a small investment in machinery. At the next level is the starting point for WFF members, who employ up to 50 people and have the resources to invest in high-quality machinery and plants to safely produce consistently good quality. There is a growing number of larger organizations employing 50 to 200 people with state-of-the-art machinery and national coverage. Some of them deliver hundreds of countertops every day.

The vast majority of UK worktop manufacturing is in quartz (engineered stone) materials. Sintered and ceramic materials are becoming more and more popular and demand the best machinery to manufacture them effectively.

What incidence does silicosis have within the worktop manufacturing sector in the United Kingdom?

There are no figures for silicosis in the UK, but the circumstantial evidence is that there are not many cases at present. However, awareness of the risk of SCR is very high, especially with the large amount of quartz currently being specified. The Health and Safety Executive has advised that this will be high on their list of items to monitor this year.

What consequences does it have for the employer with a case in his staff?

I have no information on this.

What support do you offer in these cases?

The WFF is not currently equipped to advise, but our members regularly share information and peer-to-peer advice as issues arise in our industry.

How much should a countertop manufacturer charge to make a basic countertop, regardless of the material?

The WFF is not interested in establishing pricing policies for our members. In general, our manufacturing members should be paid a fair price that allows them to adequately employ their staff, pay their taxes, and have capital available to invest in essential machinery. Certain materials require slower cutting or more handling, which will increase prices.

Is countertop installation a service that is outsourced to the UK or is it also done by the countertop manufacturer?

Most manufacturers employ their own installers, either directly or as subcontractors that they use directly. The supply of countertops to third parties for installation is a very small percentage of the market. There are a growing number of companies that sell countertops and employ their own installers, but outsource production to one of the larger companies.

What are the best selling brands, colors and thicknesses in the UK? Cosentino and Caesarstone dominate the market in the UK, with gray white quartz making up a significant proportion, much of it with some sort of marble effect. Most worktops in the UK are traditionally 30mm thick, but with cost pressures and the move to handleless doors, we are seeing an increase in 20mm thick materials. 12mm materials are relatively rare in the UK. It may be that the wooden construction of many UK kitchens makes it difficult to use thinner materials due to flexing of the floors.

How much has the price of an average countertop increased in the last year for the customer and when do you think it will do so in 2023?

Countertop prices increased dramatically in 2022. The impact of transportation costs is extremely high and this coupled with material shortages. Materials are typically 20% or even more expensive than they were a couple of years ago, and natural stone has risen in price just as dramatically as engineered products. We know that in 2023 there will be an increase in price pressure due to global inflation and the ongoing geopolitical situation. Margins for manufacturers have shrunk and most members have not passed the full impact of material costs. Even assuming there is no severe recession in 2023, manufacturers will need to pay close attention to their costs to survive a very challenging year.

What project would you like to carry out from the WFF in 2023?

The most important task for the WFF is to grow the number of associates. This will allow us to have the resources to achieve much needed best practices and training standards, and the ability to audit our members against these standards.

Our goal for 2023 is for WFF members to be recognized by the industry as suppliers of high-quality countertops from trusted, safe and sustainable companies.

