

DIRECTOR'S BLOG 2010

December 2010

SNIPEF HELPS ITS MEMBERS IN DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

With the unexpected arrival of heavy snow in November, many members of SNIPEF who thought that 2010 was difficult enough might wonder just when things might get better. Access to sites has been severely restricted in the last week or so and it is predicted that there is more snow to come.

One of the roles of any trade association is to provide assistance to its members and SNIPEF has had a very busy year in helping members in a wide range of ways:

- Many members contact the organisation for advice on issues such as what to do when employees can't get to work in the snow, how to recruit a new apprentice or for guidance on a technical or safety issue. Professional advice is provided at no extra cost to members. It is, however, amazing to find that in a recent survey of members many did not know what advice was available.
- During the snowy days of January 2010, SNIPEF was lobbying for the introduction of a Boiler Scrappage Scheme. This lobbying was successful and led to many SNIPEF members getting much needed work in the installation of new boilers under the scheme.
- Other members have benefitted from joining SNIPEF's new Approved Certifier of Construction Scheme approved by the Scottish Government in the middle of the year. This Scheme allows firms to self-certify that their work complies with the Building Regulations and can lead to cost and time savings on work where building warrants are required
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- SNIPEF teamed up with Business Stream, the arm of Scottish Water which supplies water and waste water services to 99% of businesses in Scotland. The Business Stream website now recommends the use of Licensed SNIPEF plumbing firms to their customers.
- For many years, SNIPEF has operated a group scheme for liability insurance and this continues to be very popular with members as it can deliver significant cost savings on premiums and an assurance that the appropriate level of cover is being provided.
- SNIPEF continues to be active in the area of renewable technologies which is an important area of growth for the plumbing and heating industry. Our aim is to ensure that SNIPEF members are recognised as major players in this work.
- SNIPEF led the Scottish construction industry when it introduced its Licensing Scheme some years ago. Today, similar schemes are operated in most of the other major parts of the construction industry. Licensing is the only way that customers can be assured that work will be done by qualified operatives working for businesses which hold appropriate insurances and are covered by an independent complaints mechanism and warranty scheme.
- In Northern Ireland, SNIPEF introduced a Water Regulations Approved Contractor scheme in conjunction with NI Water.

In difficult economic times, most organisations have to consider all of their costs and sometimes decisions are taken to save money by withdrawing from a trade association.

However, experience shows that it is when times are hard that trade association membership can be most useful. SNIPEF believes that it delivers excellent value for money for its members and it hopes that this is recognised by those who benefit from all or some of the services listed above.

As we approach the end of a difficult year, SNIPEF is pleased to report a net **increase** in its membership in 2010 (for the first time in several years) and the signs for a further increase in 2011 are promising.

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November 2010

We can never take plumbing too seriously

A Professor of Philosophy in Ottawa, Canada recently wrote an article decrying World Philosophy Day (18 November in case you did not already know) as meaningless as philosophy is an important part of our everyday lives. He went on to say that there would be no point in having a World Plumbing Day as plumbing, too, is an important everyday issue.

The first World Plumbing Day on 11 March 2010 clearly had no impact on this Professor. I have taken issue with his stance (in a letter to the newspaper in which his article appeared) by pointing out that millions of people throughout the world have no real understanding that plumbing is a major contributor to public health and the health of the planet. It is surely better to raise awareness through activities which will attract media attention on one day a year. The hope would always be that the awareness would last for the rest of the year (and in some cases even for a lifetime).

Having just returned from a personal trip to north east India (when plumbing was not on my planned agenda), it was hard to ignore the myriad of plastic water pipes which criss-crossed the streets in a busy town. It was sad to see people with their water cans and basins collecting their day's supply of water from tiny holes in these plastic pipes every morning. Equally sad, was the obvious stench of sewage which permeated the air in another busy town in the region.

The Indian conditions spotted on my trip struck a chord because they are conditions which people in Scotland largely do not see. Yet, I am sure that the vast majority of Scots (not involved in our industry) still take plumbing totally for granted. They turn on the tap and get potable water. They flush the toilet and don't have to worry about the contents. Yet, many of them complain when their plumber charges at a rate which is a lot lower than their

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garage charges to service the car or the washing machine repair man charges to even look at a faulty machine.

World Plumbing Day 2011 will be celebrated in many countries as a way of raising awareness- let us hope that the message gets through to customers of the industry in this country for whom plumbing is simply something which is a nuisance when it doesn't work properly.

The tragedy of business failures

The announcement that Scotland's largest employer of plumbing labour had failed is a salutary message for everyone involved in the industry. Apart from the human impact (with many plumbers and plumbing apprentices having lost their livelihoods), there is the impact on the firm's customers and on the rest of the industry which must have seen this as an alarming development. Although every business failure will have been caused by a whole range of different factors, this event reminds us all that the industry is by no means out of the woods which the recent economic crisis has created.

October 2010

Autumn Opportunities

The leaves are falling, daylight hours are shortening and the Government is sharpening its (already sharp) spending cuts pencil. At first glance, it might seem appropriate to think that reasonable pessimism is the order of the day.

Those running plumbing businesses have had more than enough reason to be pessimistic over the last couple of years. New housing work dried up (virtually overnight). There were fewer new bathrooms or heating systems when people stopped moving home. Belts were generally tightened which reduced the home improvement market generally. For some, the arrival of the month of October 2010 might well simply be another reason to add to the gloom.

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For others, however, this is the season of opportunity and optimism. Some SNIFE members have enjoyed a busy summer fitting boilers under the Scottish boiler scrappage scheme. This has provided much-needed work which will make a real difference to the environment and the fuel bills of customers. One English independent plumber's merchant reported recently that his firm had its best ever September for sales. A Scottish local authority has indicated that it will no longer carry out drain tests and will expect such work to be carried out by Approved Certifiers of Construction (under the scheme recently launched by SNIFE). SNIFE has had more applications for membership this year than for several years. Although apprentice recruitment numbers are still much lower than at their peak, there has been a modest increase this year in the total number recruited. It is believed that some larger plumbing contractors might be recruiting staff (after two years of reducing their workforce).

There will be many readers of this blog who read the above and wonder if they are living in another (more real) world. However, it is likely to be those who can take the glass half full approach who survive these turbulent times. Firms which promote themselves as being different have a better chance of success. Those who promote the fact that they are Licensed Plumbing Businesses and have met the standards of the Construction Licensing Executive (CLE) or the (growing) number of Approved Certifiers of Construction should expect to get work as customers take greater care to ensure that their money is spent wisely. Firms which have prepared themselves for the renewable energy work which people are increasingly talking about should be well positioned to plug gaps in more traditional areas of work.

There is no doubt that more pain has yet to come to all aspects of the economy but smart plumbing businesses should be able to find ways to rise above the pain and ensure that this autumn is a positive time for their businesses.

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September 2010

An Exciting Start

In Colleges of Further Education all over Scotland groups of individuals are about to start on a journey which should see them, in about 4 years' time, becoming professionals in one of the world's oldest- and most underrated industries.

Many of these people are recent school leavers with good qualifications in important subjects like Maths and English as workers in this industry need to be able to calculate and read and understand written instructions. Passes in science and technical subjects might point to the individuals having practical skills. Others will have left school some time ago and might either have undertaken other studies or have worked in different industries.

All of them will be aiming high with a Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ) at Level 3 being the goal of their college attendance and industry recognition being the overall goal of their training. Each one will have the backing of an employer in the industry who has committed to provide the essential work experience which is a major part of the training programme.

Unlike their friends who have chosen to go to University, these people will earn while they learn and should not be lumbered with the millstone of debt when they qualify. Above all, they should expect to enjoy an occupation with one of the highest levels of job satisfaction of any job and an excellent prospect of earnings.

The fortunate people described here will probably have had to face significant competition before beginning their training. The recession has had a major effect on the ability of employers in the industry to offer a four year commitment to new recruits. New starts this year are likely to be less than 50% of the number recruited 3 years ago.

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In a blog about plumbing, it is of course obvious that the people described here are this year's new plumbing apprentices. They should certainly appreciate the value and worth to society of the role for which they have chosen to train. How many customers of plumbing services however give appropriate recognition to the commitment and patience which is required to become a professional plumber? This is not an industry where people can be trained overnight or even over a few months.

If you are the employer of one of these new starts, you should feel justifiably proud that you are contributing to the future of our industry. If you are one of the new-starts- congratulations and good luck. If you are a potential user of plumbing services and have stumbled across this blog, then I hope that you will think of the process which the qualified professional who does your work has undertaken to be able to deliver a safe and effective service to you.

August 2010

Can your customers trust what you say?

All aspects of construction (including plumbing) have a pretty poor reputation when it comes to delivering what customers want when they want it. Although we would like to think that this is a minority problem, one recent experience suggests that it might be more common than we would like to think.

Shortly after its move to new offices SNIFE needed some relatively minor construction work (NOT plumbing) undertaken. We will not go into detail here to spare the blushes of the contractor concerned. Keen to use a member of the appropriate trade association, we found a member firm based very close to the new offices. On phoning, I discovered that this firm had suffered during the recession and no longer employed the kind of tradesmen we needed. They were, however, happy to recommend another contractor. Our first mistake was to take that recommendation at face value.

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The contractor responded to my telephone request promptly and visited the site the next day discuss to measure up and agree our requirements. When asked when we would like the work done, he said that he could probably do it either the following day or the day after. Mistake number two was to accept such a commitment at face value.

Exactly three weeks later (and after three broken commitments as to when he would appear), we had had enough and phoned his office to cancel the job. Strangely enough, there was a phone call within the hour and a promise that he would come immediately. Mistake number three was to accept that rather than sticking to our guns and finding another contractor. Our very plausible contractor appeared that day with two men and proceeded to carry out two of the three jobs which needed to be done. "We'll be back tomorrow to finish off" were his parting words. Mistake number four was to believe him.

This is being written 6 working days after his promise to return the next day. Naturally enough we have seen or heard nothing. It is not looking likely that we will have the third job done any time soon.

There is simply no excuse for this type of behavior. What was wrong in him saying initially that he was really quite busy and would probably not be able to do the work for 3 weeks? At least at that stage we could have decided whether we could really wait for 3 weeks. What leads any contractor to promise to customers that he will be there next day when he knows full well that this is unlikely?

It would be wonderful to think that no SNIFE member would ever conduct his business in this way but we suspect that there may well be some who can identify too easily with the pattern described above.

It really is little wonder that the industry suffers a bad reputation-experiences like this simply serve to confirm that much needs to improve before customers will really be able to trust construction contractors in general.

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DIRECTOR'S BLOG 2010 **July 2010**

New home for SNIFE

Thursday 1 July 2010 was a significant day for SNIFE. The long planned move to new purpose-built offices in Edinburgh commenced that day.

2 Walker Street in Edinburgh had been the “home” of the Federation for over fifty years. Built in the 1820s as a private residence, it was a delightful property in a leafy area near to the west end of Edinburgh city centre. While it had served the organization well, it had its limitations including a lack of space and some departments of the organization being accommodated in separate rooms in different parts of the building. Although the organization had been considering the desirability of new premises from time to time over the last 20 years, the SNIFE Council agreed just two years ago that a move to a 21st century building would enable the organization and its staff to deliver a truly 21st century service to members and the wider industry.

2 Walker Street was sold and it is expected that one day it will return to the residential use for which it was originally designed and built.

Bellevue House, 22 Hopetoun Street, towards the east end of the city centre is the only office building in a street of recently completed residential developments and it has been fitted-out by SNIFE (together with Plumbing Pensions (UK) Ltd which has also moved from Walker Street), to provide good meeting facilities and modern, open plan office accommodation.

The move, which had been planned for the first weekend in July since the building was purchased almost exactly one year before, went well and SNIFE staff were back at their desks even earlier than had originally been hoped.

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While any move of this magnitude does not come without a few glitches, it is good to report that none were major or insurmountable and already most staff have become well accustomed to their new working environment.

SNIFE looks forward to welcoming members to the new offices and the staff look forward to continuing to tackle the real issues facing the industry today from the modern SNIFE offices.

June 2010

Scottish Government Approved Certifier of Construction Scheme Launched

A new scheme which will allow professional plumbing and heating installers to self-certify drainage, heating and plumbing work, including micro-renewable installations such as solar panels, which is subject to a Building Warrant, was launched by the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change, Stewart Stevenson MSP at the Scottish and Northern Ireland Plumbing Employers' Federation (SNIFE) conference which was held on Friday 21 May in East Kilbride. The Scottish Ministers approved a Scheme for Certification of Construction (Drainage, Heating & Plumbing Installations) at the end of last year and at the same time, the Scottish Government's Building Standards Division (BSD) appointed SNIFE to run the Scheme.

As well as being able to self-certify their work, members of the scheme will also be able to display a Scottish Government logo which will identify them as a member of the scheme. The Approved Certifier of Construction Scheme is a significant step forward for the Plumbing Industry in Scotland. For the first time, properly qualified plumbers will be able to self-certify their work under a building warrant without waiting for a Local Authority inspector to inspect their work and sign off a completion certificate.

The range of work covered under the scheme which includes drainage, plumbing, heating, micro-renewables as well as a selection of electrical work is also significant as the scheme

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covers not only the traditional work areas of the industry such as drainage but it also encompasses the new skills the industry is learning on micro-renewables. It is often claimed that it is difficult to find a really good plumbing and heating firm. This has now changed in a dramatic way as Scottish Government Approved Certifiers will give purchasers of drainage, heating and plumbing services real confidence that work will be carried out to high standards in accordance with industry and regulatory standards.

It is hoped that SNIPEF members will recognise the outstanding opportunity offered to them by the Approved Certifier Scheme. The scheme will go live to the public shortly and customers will be able to access the Building Standards website (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/Building/Building-standards>) and search for a list of Approved Certifiers.

May 2010

Why is gas work still done illegally?

Gas Safe Register (the organization which is now responsible for the registration of UK gas installers) believes that some 250,000 gas jobs are undertaken illegally each year in the UK. Some 20 years after it became a legal requirement for those working on gas for gain to be registered this is an appalling statistic.

SNIPEF was active in the drive for statutory registration of gas businesses in the 1980s and remains absolutely committed to this issue. Prior to statutory registration there were simply too many people dying each year as a result of poor gas installation or maintenance work.

A combination of factors including registration, the competence assessment of individual operatives and publicity have helped to see the number of deaths reduce. However, gas is still potentially lethal. Only this week a plumber has been charged with manslaughter following the death of a young woman in a relatively new flat. Her lodger is still in a coma

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two years after the incident. The plumbing business which sub-contracted this individual has also been charged.

There is really no excuse for anyone either to do gas work illegally or indeed for a consumer to pay someone to carry out illegal work. Twenty years into the registration regime, absolutely no one working with gas can claim ignorance of the requirement for the business to be registered and for all operatives to demonstrate their competence. A blatant defiance of the law deserves to be punished severely.

Consumers *might* be in a position to claim that they were not aware. There can be confusion- particularly if individuals turn up at a home displaying their ACS competence cards. It is perhaps not surprising that some consumers don't know that this card does not prove that the person being paid for the work is registered. A recent trade press article suggested that employees of one of the UK's largest gas suppliers regularly work on their own, in their own time, while not being registered. Apparently against the company's policy, such illegal behavior also deserves to be dealt with appropriately. However, there has been extensive publicity over the years and we feel that too many consumers use illegal gas workers simply to save money. How can you balance savings a few pounds if someone dies as a result?

As part of its contract with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), Gas Safety Register has been undertaking a review of the current enforcement regime. We hope that when this review is completed in the next few months, we will see a sensible package of measures which will help to reduce even further the extent to which people are put at risk from illegal gas work.

April 2010

It's Spring and the chilly wintry conditions continue

In January, this blog mentioned wintry conditions. Many people would assume that 3 months on we might be welcoming Spring with all its connotations of warmer weather and

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longer hours of daylight. Sadly, as I write this, the snow continues to fall not too far away from Edinburgh (where at best the weather could be described as dreich). Who could possibly disbelieve that there is something changing with weather patterns? Ask those who have been on holiday in Spain or Florida in recent months.

So much for the weather! What about the temperature of the industry? Have we moved on during these last three months or do we continue to suffer the chilly economic conditions which have blasted many firms over recent months? Has anything happened which might cause plumbing contractors' temperatures to rise?

Uncertain is probably the best word to describe the health and mood of many plumbing businesses. Some new houses are being built- but not in anything like previous volumes and prices are being depressed. Repair, maintenance and renewal work goes on but many customers are wary about their employment position and might not be willing to spend on that desired (but not essential) new bathroom suite. A Westminster General Election in a few weeks with no clear outcome is another reason for the uncertainty to continue.

On a more positive note, details are still awaited of the Scottish boiler scrappage scheme while at the same time applications for the 125,000 grants in England have now closed. SNIFE led the calls for a Scottish scheme and is hopeful that when the arrangements are announced (this month?) they will contain welcome news for SNIFE members.

If workload remains uncertain, then SNIFE members should see the announcement of the Approved Certifier of Construction Scheme for Drainage, Heating and Plumbing as something of a boost. The Scheme is an excellent opportunity for certain firms to stand head and shoulders above competitors who are unable to certify that their work meets the Building Standards requirements. Supported by a logo indicating Scottish Government endorsement, Approved Certifiers should see real benefits coming from their approval under the Scheme.

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As the driving rain continues and people outside remain cocooned in their winter woolies, we continue to hope that both the weather and the health of plumbing businesses will improve and indeed blossom in the months ahead.

MARCH 2010

Celebrate Plumbing on World Plumbing Day

There are days to commemorate or highlight all sorts of events or issues. 11 March 2010 will see the creation of another day on the calendar of world events- the first ever World Plumbing Day.

An initiative of the World Plumbing Council, World Plumbing Day seeks to raise world awareness of the significant contribution which the plumbing industry makes to health and the environment.

Writing in the late 1800s, Scottish inventor of the Buchan trap, William Paton Buchan, wrote about a good plumber being “a benefactor of humanity” and predicted that in time plumbers would be seen as being important as medical doctors. Is that the comparison which many people in the UK would make today? Probably not- but the truth remains that without good plumbing, public health in this country would be seriously worse than it currently is. In developing countries, the situation is even worse with millions of people dying each year simply because they do not have access to safe water and sanitation (the bread and butter of the plumbing industry).

With the whole world focussing on climate change and the depletion of natural resources, it is again the plumbing industry which is playing a major role in the design, installation and maintenance of energy and water efficiency products and increasingly renewable technologies like solar, ground and air source heating and biomass boilers.

Working with the theme, “Plumbing-Vital to Global Health”, it is hoped that on this first World Plumbing Day many people in many countries will have their attention drawn to the fact that plumbing is important.

I will be in Beijing, China on World Plumbing Day 2010 holding a press conference and speaking at a special Technical Forum which has been arranged for the Day. Here in Scotland there will be events in the Scottish Parliament (where a motion has already been lodged marking the Day)

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and in Buchanan Street, Glasgow. Curious about that one? If you can, go to Buchanan Street between 1100 and 1300 on 11 March and find out! There will also be events in places including USA, Australia and India as plumbing organisations seek to use the Day to tell people about our industry.

Join with us in celebrating World Plumbing Day on 11 March 2010 and get the message across about plumbing!

FEBRUARY 2010

The Boiler Scrappage Scheme Saga

The early December 2009 announcement of a Boiler Scrappage Scheme caused great excitement in industry, consumer and environmental circles. Following the UK Government's scheme to encourage the replacement of old cars (a welcome boost to an ailing car industry) an incentive to encourage the replacement of old, expensive to run and environmentally unfriendly central heating boilers is a great idea. It can benefit consumers, the environment and an industry which has suffered badly in the recession.

However, things were not as straightforward as they looked. It became apparent after a few days that the announcement by the **UK** Chancellor of the Exchequer only applied in England. The reaction from the UK's other three countries was predictably loud and sustained.

SNIFE was at the forefront of the Scottish and Northern Irish cries and letters and emails were sent to a range of Ministers and officials. The responses were disappointing in that no one seemed willing to make a quick decision. At the same time, public awareness became enormous across the entire UK. During one week the most accessed story on AOL was about "boiler scrappage scheme". How unusual for a plumbing industry story to nudge Brad, Angelina, Jordan and Co. out of the limelight!

The Scottish Parliament operates a Public Petitions system where anyone can raise an issue with the Parliament. This has previously resulted in changes in the law. For example, the requirement to fit thermostatic mixing valves came from a Public Petition. Part of the process can include a facility under which the Parliament website hosts an e-petition allowing people to express their support for the issue. SNIFE decided to follow this route as a way of showing our politicians that this would be a popular measure and we prepared a petition to go on the e-

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petition site. Although it took 3 weeks from submission to appearing on the site, within minutes of it being posted there, the signatures began to be added with some 300 people supporting the idea within the first few days.

Politics can be unpredictable. (Is that a gross understatement?). It came as a (pleasant) surprise to wake up on the morning of the Scottish Budget debate (3 February 2010) to learn that the Finance Minister had, overnight, added £2m for a Scottish Boiler Scrappage Scheme to his package of proposals. Although this was by no means the most important issue in the package, it did feature in the Parliament debate and we were pleased, just after 5pm, to see the Budget being passed which means that there **will be** a Scottish Boiler Scrappage Scheme.

As is often said, the devil will be in the detail. £2m is a very small amount of funding (proportionately much less than being spent in England) and will have to be spent wisely. SNIFE has offered advice and assistance to officials as the scheme is developed and we hope to see our suggestions being taken on board.

JANUARY 2010

A chilly start to 2010- will things warm up?

Plumbers were in high demand in many parts of the country in the first weeks of this New Year dealing with the aftermath of the worst winter weather which we have seen in 30 years. Media attention was high and a number of SNIFE members were interviewed on national television either giving advice to customers or explaining just how busy they had been over the Festive Season. One member in Kingussie had only managed a couple of hours away from work over a whole week to have his Christmas Dinner.

While some people might see repairing frost bursts as “manna from heaven” for the plumbing industry, I am sure that most plumbers would prefer not to have these short bursts of pressurized activity- often working in difficult conditions at unsocial hours (and during holidays) for unknown customers (which can lead to payment problems). For that reason, SNIFE's focus before and during periods of exceptionally cold weather is as much about giving preventative advice as about encouraging customers who experience problems to ensure that they engage a SNIFE Licensed Plumbing Business.

Another downside of the cold snap was the transport difficulties which always arise when we have even a smattering of snow or ice. SNIFE received calls from members who had

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employees unable to get to work as their roads had not been gritted and public transport was either cancelled or sporadic. I know that colleagues in countries with much more severe winters don't seem to have these problems.

After the thaw, a couple of published reports painted a pretty gloomy picture of recent and future construction industry activity. On the one hand, the Bank of England described construction as having been worse affected than any other sector of the UK economy in late 2009 **"by some margin"**. Not just a little bit worse then. Secondly, projections produced by the Construction Products Association are a mixed bag with many aspects of construction predicting that 2010 will not see a dramatic increase in workload. SNIFE members still report difficulties in getting any support from their banks so even where work is available, it is not always possible to finance it. That is a tragedy which will inevitably lead to problems in the months ahead.

In many years, Scotland and Northern Ireland don't experience bad winter weather until February. Is it too soon to think that we have seen the worst? Let us hope that better conditions are not far away- both in weather and workload terms.