

Back-pack vacuums: why have they yet to succeed?

In the first of a new series from industry expert **Peter Holt**, this article considers the potential for the back-pack vacuum cleaner within the UK commercial cleaning sector.

If I could show you a simple way of increasing your daily cleaning productivity by 400%+ would you do it?

It sounds like a no-brainer, yet equipment that has been available in the UK for over 15 years has not been adopted as mainstream in an industry that is crying out for innovation and change. Building owners continue to demand higher standards at lower costs, so where is that improvement going to come from?



Evidence has proven that productivity levels of 700-1000 square metres per hour can consistently be achieved with back-pack vacuum cleaners.

Having spent time in Australia working with BSCs it seemed clear to me that the high level of productivity they manage to achieve, on a regular basis, is totally down to the way they correctly exploit the benefits that a back-pack vacuum offers. The total buy-in from the client and the BSC, helped by the profile of the operative being different, makes the process work. Unlike the UK at that time, the typical cleaner was often male, young, very fit and an aspirational immigrant.

Empirical evidence, from Australasia, has proven over many years that productivity levels of 700-1000 square metres per hour can consistently be achieved under typical DOC conditions. As further support, a senior executive of a major contractor recently claimed to be quoting clients on the basis of 1000 square metres per hour for full vacuuming with a back vac and 3000 square metres for spot vacuuming.

With this in mind, in my days as MD of Truvox International, we embarked on launching this in the UK with the clear objective of making back-packs the 'vacuum of choice' for daily cleaning in offices, schools, universities and so on. Senior executives of all the major BSCs got very excited, trips were planned to Australia to see for themselves, and test sites were set up.

Even though the product itself was excellent there was only limited success and some contracts did move away from tub vacuums, but for reasons that we now think we understand, it did not become mainstream. Interestingly enough, since then most manufacturers now offer a back-pack in their line, with total sales representing less than 1% of the total number of commercial vacuums purchased in the UK. It is clearly seen as a niche market.

So why didn't it succeed back then? Change is always hard and in our industry the first-line supervisor is always the person that makes any change work - but only if they are totally on-board with the objectives. This never happened, nor did the need to totally review the footprint of the contract which required buy-in from the client. It would have meant fewer cleaners, but at higher pay and possibly a return to the client by way of additional services or a lower cost. Major attitude shifts are hard to achieve and the motivation to do this wasn't there.

One of the reasons given was the lack, at that time, of a battery powered back-pack vacuum. With the slow introduction of day-time cleaning, there was a genuine need, but given most cleaning tasks are still not carried out in working hours, this could not have been the real reason for the lack of success.

Since then there are now a number of cordless offerings available, mainly with Lithium-Ion batteries that have a run time of under 45 minutes. Often with a spare battery on the belt, the operative has quite a heavy weight and you still may not have enough power to complete a shift. If one



The Valet back-pack vacuum cleaner from Truvox International.

imagined a major office cleaning contract, maybe with 30 cleaners, will they be able to manage the changing of up to 60 batteries each night and ensure that they are all fully powered for the next shift? There are also a number of health and safety considerations if this task is not carried out correctly. This consideration, together with a relatively high capital cost, again keeps this as a niche solution.

What's now changed to make a move to back-packs viable? Firstly, the market conditions. Everything is now so cost driven that the building owner/client is more likely to be responsive to the re-engineering of their contract. The knowledge and tools available to measure output have improved, as has the profile of the operative. Whilst we still have a good mix of male and female cleaners, we now have a generation that has grown up with a back-pack to carry their school books and their computers. We have a growing number of young, fit people, many of whom are aspirational immigrants.

In the end, to make major changes work requires time and effort. It may well not work first time, maybe not even the second nor even the third, but with such huge proven gains, surely this is worth the effort.

Peter Holt is director of Consultholt Limited. He has a number of Twitter and Linked-In discussion forums - be part of the debate by connecting via <http://uk.linkedin.com/in/consultholtlimited> or www.twitter.com/Consultholt.

