

Applied Industrial Flooring Canada

Quality Underfoot



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Mark McLeod, the president of Applied Industrial Flooring (AIF), is someone who espouses the virtues of good business practice. He believes that good business begets good business – that honesty is the only option when working with his clients.

Written by Mark Golombek

FULL disclosure is an essential aspect of any business process. Mark's company is Applied Industrial Flooring, and any outfit that takes the firm knows that they are getting the best possible service and follow up. Mark is not afraid of hard work and hires according to his own principles, a practice that has made Applied Industrial Flooring one of the most revered companies in the flooring industry. We take a closer look at what makes the company so popular and effective.

Mark's foray into the flooring industry began in Winnipeg. He

came from a construction background, and became involved in installing floor solutions where conventional flooring was not suitable. He saw the potential in this niche market. "I took it upon myself to chase large industrial accounts in the food and beverage sector, as well as the chemical industry, and offer floor solutions in their highly fatigued areas. These were high risk areas, which require expensive installations compared to typical flooring applications." Some industrial sectors face particular environmental issues dealing with the water table and ground contamination, or reduction of microbe activity in food grade plants; Applied Industrial Flooring provides the leading edge technology required to address these needs.



The food and beverage industry comprises AIF's core business. The company also has expertise in the automotive sector, but elected to shift gears when the recession hit. Mark found that food handling facilities could benefit from the company's experience with polyurethane concretes, which are designed specifically for high temperature wash downs and high chemical resistance. "We will selectively choose technologies that really serve a particular industry well," explains Mark. "For example, Protective Industrial Polymers makes antimicrobial polyurethane concrete floor and wall systems. In the [food] industry, there have been e. coli scares, so Protective Industrial Polymers' technology can be used to give large meat packing plants peace of mind and run a safer lower risk environment."

Simply put, these technologies help to reduce risk – of injury, chemical spills, and contamination of product and people. Applied Industrial Flooring's focus, knowledge and access to quality suppliers give it a leg up on the competition. Aside from its anti-microbial products, there are other technologies the company employs to meet client needs. 'Brown Buildings,' for example, are unusable, uninhabitable, and uninsurable properties that often comprise part of a large company's holdings. The structures may be environmentally contaminated with substances such as mercury, other heavy metals, or solvents, and represent a liability in their present state. AIF, however, is able to turn these sites around with technologies that prevent the mercury (or other dangerous chemicals) from contaminating the surrounding areas and can even return these buildings back into productive assets.

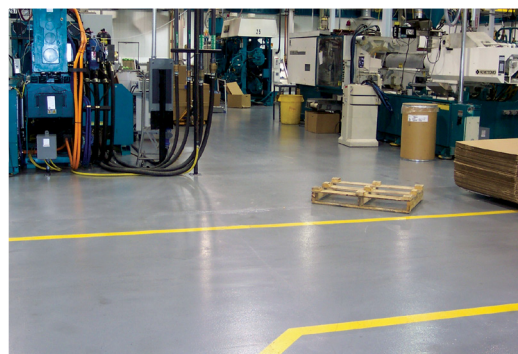
"It takes a special talent and skill set to place the floors and have them look good... I'd like to say proudly that we have some of the most talented applicators in the province."

It is not only in remediation, but in installation that AIF leads the environmental charge. Solvent products, for instance, are no longer accepted as a means of floor installation. "One of the workhorse floor systems we use is called a Trowel Mortar. This is applied to a floor that's badly scarred or requires heavy duty wear capability," explains Mark. "We will use advanced polymer chemistry to help build a thin layer that is well bonded, robust enough for high traffic, and will withstand certain chemicals. Part of the filler is recycled glass so we can create that mortar [using recycled materials] instead of using conventional means." Another technology used is called concrete polishing. This approach works well on existing concrete slabs that have turned dull and coarse through wear and tear. The floor ends up with a very high gloss. An environmentally friendly chemical is applied, which intensifies and hardens the top surface. It is hard, strong, and easy to keep clean – similar to a granite countertop finish.

The aforementioned technology is currently being used at a large GM plant. The GM Corvette assembly plant in Kentucky has used epoxy coatings for years, necessitating regular maintenance, but with the concrete polishing there is no coating to sheer off as the concrete surface *is* the finish. The method is cost-effective and environmentally friendly, not to mention visually stunning. The concrete byproduct can even be sent to a concrete recycling facility for reintegration into new buildings ►



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► Applied Industrial Flooring is also presently at work on Ripley's Aquarium, located below the CN Tower. "The Ripley's people are very concerned that the technology we are providing allows for a safe habitat for their living fish," says Mark. "The project gives us a chance to show off some of our technology. It's lit up with a series of different coloured floors." The facility is largely concrete, with acrylic panels placed in the viewing walls. Applied Industrial Flooring is providing technologies that help seal the concrete and working with floor areas where water is likely to spill. "You can imagine there are lots of areas with mechanical pumps and rooms to move all the water. That's the area where most of our special flooring is being installed."

In addition to its innovative technologies, the company sets itself apart

from the competition by offering a floor auditing service. Food and beverage companies often have massive facilities, and are looking at a significant scope of work to keep the facilities operating at peak safety. "We offer to go into the facility and review in detail the customer's flooring requirements," explains Mark. "We identify areas where the floor surface is at risk, offer specific details about what we would do to perform a repair, and give them some numbers, so by the time we hand in that audit package there is information available to all parties – operations and maintenance managers, quality control personnel, health and safety operators, controllers, etc. That helps to keep us in

front of the customer as it's a very good package for dialogue."

Finding the right employees for flooring installation is not always easy. The work is extremely physical, and largely involves getting concrete ready for the new surface. Heavy tools and equipment are of course utilized, but when it comes time to place the floor, Mark says that the workers change gears and become artists. "It takes a special talent and skill set to place the floors and have them look good. Liquid resins or trowel mortars have to be applied, and they don't hide any mistakes. When the floor is done, it's very visible what has been applied. I'd like to say proudly that we have some of the most talented appli-

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cators in the province. We pay them well, and our retention is good. We try to give them family time, and we have a group benefits plan that rivals those of the unions."

One of the main challenges, then, is to find the right people for the job, and that is not always an easy endeavor. Yet another challenge is in dealing with how demanding the work is. Much of the company's work must be performed during holidays and weekends so as to be conducive to the client's own operations schedule. Another challenge the company faces is in remediating previous installations which were not necessarily performed to AIF's standards. Preparation is 60 to 75 percent of the work, says Mark, and previous installers may have cut corners, leading to flaws all the way through which Applied Industrial Flooring must address and repair or replace.

In terms of expansion, the company is looking to introduce its anti-microbial products to hospitals and senior citizens facilities. "We think it's a good fit, and some of the large institutional kitchens are another market we are looking into. Supermarkets are interesting to us as well. We find that as the business models evolve for these supermarkets, they are open almost all year-round, almost all day, so they really don't have very much time for repair and maintenance." They need long-term solutions, and with an Applied Industrial Flooring installation, these clients won't need to worry about their floors for a good 15 to 20 years.

Mark McLeod is serious about the services his company provides. He stands by his work, and has a message that he wants to relay to anyone who is considering a new install or refurbishment: "One thing we really try to emphasize with our customers is that they are our champions. They are the life blood of our business, so we are straight with them. We tell them what the limitations are. I don't have a problem saying to a customer, 'This is a bad choice.' Because in this industry, dishonesty always catches up with you. If you put something down that will only last a couple of years, then the customer needs to know. They need to understand that when they are investing in their facility, we will give them full disclosure. They need to understand the risks and rewards. And that's what gives us that long term relationship with them. They need good information so they can make choices, and hopefully those choices lubricate our relationship and encourage it to co-exist for many years to come." That is most certainly the philosophy of a successful and enduring enterprise. ■

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