

Trades without frontiers

Service Engineer highlights the gradually blurring lines between heating and air conditioning and asks what the changes will mean for rac engineers

Many manufacturers are now bringing in new heating, air conditioning and control products that are designed to break through the demarcation lines between the traditional heating and air conditioning sectors, such as heat pumps solely designed for the provision of hot water.

However, how is this affecting installers on the ground? The answer is, as with most things, 'it depends'.

Alan Sellers, director of Surrey-based domestic installation specialist Climate First, has begun to notice the effects of the blurring of the edges between heating and cooling.

His company has just been asked to install a Canadian Hi-Velocity air conditioning system in a pub in North London, which heats as well as cools.

Its cooling will be provided by a Daikin condenser, but the heating will be produced by a gas boiler feeding hot water to a heat pump, which provides warm air to the system. It is an extremely powerful system designed to heat up an empty pub very quickly, later providing cooling when the pub fills up.

In this case, while the system is integrated, the various components of it are still being installed by separate companies – specialists in their own trades.

"The wiring and controls are a lot more complicated than a normal air conditioning installation, with sensors in a lot of different areas," says Alan Sellers. "Suddenly we are becoming involved with boilers for the first time, but I don't think it will be the last."

Mark Lister of Wave Heat Recovery, a sister company of Wave Air Conditioning, says his company has had a number of enquiries recently from housing associations that want his company to provide the heat recovery element of a complete air conditioning-based heating and cooling package for social housing.

"They are looking at a combination of ducted air conditioning units and our heat recovery equipment in areas where there is no gas supply," says Mark Lister. "They are primarily interested in heating, with cooling looked on as a bonus.

"We are also currently involved with a hotel, where we are using a ground source heat pump to produce both hot and cold water, which is then pumped to fancoil units in the rooms and used for both heating and cooling.

"All of this is being done by air conditioning and heating engineers."

While recognising the blurring effect, Nigel Smith of Nottingham based installer Brookair is not that concerned about it.

Says Nigel: "I have my own customers and work, so I am not worried about competition and I have no plans to branch out to become a heating engineer.

"I am seeing more specs for jobs where heat pumps and other non-traditional heating methods are being specified – particularly in schools, with the Daikin Altherma units that are

designed to replace gas boilers."

He has noticed heating contractors and mechanical engineers trying, and in some cases succeeding, to gain business that involves the installation of air conditioning.

"It's happening more and more now with these type of companies – particularly one-man-bands – badgering wholesalers to supply them with equipment.

"Once upon a time air conditioning distributors would only supply equipment to air conditioning installers, but all that has changed now, as everyone is trying to sell as many boxes as possible.

"They get around the need for a Safe Handling of Refrigerant Certificate by using a sealed system or getting a qualified subcontractor to come in when necessary.

"One heating manufacturer, that is now badging air conditioning equipment, is even offering three-day courses to heating engineers to become air conditioning installers. You can't learn to be an air conditioning engineer in three days!"

