It goes without saying that the most important document that any wall and ceiling estimator will encounter is the job specifications. For this article I'm assuming that the customary wall and ceiling material stocks for the trade as well as the more complex equipment and systems requirements will be analyzed and noted intelligently by any qualified estimator.

But there are some special precautions that estimators should consider in the broad, general area referred to as understanding specifications and the use of construction specification summaries.

Take the matter of conflicts and ambiguities. Aside from what is already known about ambiguities and the need for special caution, additional conflicts within specifications may arise over the engineer’s use of standard paragraphs or standard sections. It may be possible to have included in your specification a standard section on sound when you know—or suspect—that no sound requirements exist on a particular job. It is obvious what has happened but it is troublesome as well.

The engineer should be called immediately. You may find either superfluous information such as above or you may be missing necessary descriptions because of specification omissions by the practice of piecing up a specification from standard sections.

Standards, Codes

Present Problems

An estimator should also have a copy of any referred-to standard... or he should insist that his suppliers guarantee conformance with same.

As to building codes, the estimator should be aware that he must know the necessary code provisions affecting his estimate. He must know that the finished installation must conform to the appropriate building code even though his present bid drawings may not comply with that code and its provisions.

Differences must be adjusted during bid time or the price must reflect the code requirements.

Material Availability

Requires Caution

It is not unusual at all for a specifier to call for either outmoded materials or very recently designed materials with which an estimator might not be immediately familiar.

Often as soon, the estimator may not be able to identify the specified materials from his catalog information. That’s when it pays to get on the phone to the design engineer or specifier and ask for clarification or explanation, especially if the item is one of major cost.

A case where this often occurs is with integrated ceilings. The technology in this area is quite rapid.

Any other material in short supply—a case of growing importance now with gypsum—or with a long delivery cycle specified for early installation on a project should be approached on a possible request for a change basis.

Or, perhaps, the estimator should anticipate building around this obstacle with temporary facilities of some sort.

A temporary facility should be the last alternative. It can be a costly option because any such facility must be installed and then removed, resulting in increased labor.

Work By Others

Is Part of Scope

Another essential scope of any bid project is the work to be done by others. It is sometimes more important, or more far-reaching to note a whole segment of work that is noted conclusively out of domain of the wall and ceiling bid.

When an estimator excludes some portion from the wall and ceiling bid it is generally quite emphatic to the architect, engineer or owner. Very seldom will this excluded portion become controversial.

The all-important point in the foregoing, though, is that should an estimator’s bid be based, even in a small part, on the use and referral to...
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standard drawings these drawings must be at this disposal.

They must be either included in his bid set (something that is not always done) or they should be easily available to him at some highly accessible place of business. This case most often occurs with utilities work, nation-wide store chains, or Federal government work.

A good estimator won’t take chances even when the missing reference drawing describes something as trivial as a door buck.

Specification Summary Should be Compiled

It is strongly recommended that the estimator analyze the wall and ceiling specification. Next, he should construct and write up a very brief summary sheet.

All important materials for the installation should be noted in short hand form to facilitate the take-off of possibly 90% of the ordinary materials encountered.

It is usually possible to condense or summarize even the biggest project in regard to take-off on one sheet of 8½” x 11” or slightly larger paper. It is suggested that the sheet be tacked up near where the plans will be worked on.

There are two kinds of summaries that an estimator can prepare.

The first is a concise listing of materials and methods only. In general only the ordinary take-off material is flagged, and this is clearly and carefully abbreviated as to quality, grade, and methods.

Interior components of steel stud ing, clips, beading, lengthy performance specifications on fire rating, sound rating, etc. are ignored. At the same time, information on the awarding authority, alternates, and similar data are left out for inclusion elsewhere.

Only pertinent information on the actual, physical wall and ceiling installation is included to assist in an intelligent take-off.

As a means of recording important information pertaining to the wall and ceiling job, a check sheet should be prepared which emphasizes all the important take-off information.

An estimator learns by writing and he saves time by not needing to make continuous reviews of the bound contract specifications.

Of even more importance this check sheet will be invaluable should he have to release or return specifications to some authority before his bid completion. Also, even following job closing this same specification sheet would be one of the most worthwhile documents in the Bid File for further review.

Additionally, there are distinct advantages to the estimator in preparing a specifications summary sheet.

By summarizing in as few words as possible, by underlining important deviations from normal, and in using “punch lines” to emphasize, the estimator quickly gets the “mental set” on a job. His condensing of specifications automatically makes him familiar.

This is why contractors like to have an estimator in on the job bidding, the pre-job conference and the briefing of the supervision on the job. He “knows” that job; he has a “mind set” for the little innuendoes that make for a profitable job.

The act of writing up the summary has virtually cemented the facts into the estimator’s mind. It will take the foreman almost the entire job to gain this “insight” of the estimator.

And the quick glance at the wall where the summary has been hung will give him instant recall.

How much superior this approach is to grabbing the specification on occasion, fumbling around, and possibly being interrupted while searching for one small paragraph.

(Editor’s Note: The author of this article, Paul Amison, is a former construction estimator who now writes freelance for construction publications.)