
The Age of Demountables?

The Recent Federal Tax Bill—
Plus Distinct Installation Advantages—
Are Making Demountables Look
Better All The Time



Not his native talent, but . . . Boy Scouting put Michael Terence Nixon into the Canadian construction business.

An 18-year-old immigrant from Chester, England, Nixon made his first job application—as a draftsman—with Westeel Products of Winnipeg. The problem was: the job had already been filled.

That's when Mike, now executive vice president of Acoustics Associates, Inc., a \$9 million-a-year diversified wall and ceiling firm in Minneapolis, Minnesota, mentioned his deep, lasting interest in Boy Scouting where he had at home qualified for the rank of Queen Scout—the equivalent of Eagle.

The benefit of the mention was that he made it to the firm's chief estimator, Norm Lowe, who also happened to be the local Boy Scout District Commissioner with firm belief that one good Scout deserved another.

"You start Monday," the crusty, hard driving Lowe told the new Canadian draftsman. That started the North American adventure which ultimately brought Mike to the United States.

Born in Newcastle-on-Tyne, located in the northeast corner where England and Scotland join, Mike undertook his mechanical engineering studies in high school and at the College of Further Education, Liverpool.

In 1955, he decided to move to Winnipeg, where he worked for Westeel Products, learning the intricacies of hollow metal frames, doors, windows and moveable partitions. Later, he

joined other construction firms all the while developing and selling moveable partition systems.

A job with NESLO brought him to the U.S. midwest. Then, in 1967, he joined Bob Wefel's Acoustics Associates. In 1980 Mike and Craig Dickson, now President, bought out Wefel who remains as Chairman and consultant. Under Dickson and Mike, the company has diversified, offering carpeting, raised floors, acoustical wall panels, open office screens, drywall, and general interior remodeling. The company is headquartered in an attractive two-story stucco-covered steel frame building with a distinct pre-cast look.

Mike and his wife, the former Helene Janet White, who was a librarian in her native Winnipeg, live in a two-level walk-out rambler home in nearby Plymouth with two of their children, David Michael, 16, and Michele Suzanne, 12. Another son, John Craig, 20, is attending the U.S. Naval Academy, in Annapolis.

Still active in Scouting, Mike lately has developed a part-time business with his wife, making hand-painted veneer cut-outs of Minnesota's state bird, the Loon, and state silhouettes. Their main interest, though, is in construction and in demountable partitions.)

DIMENSIONS: Mike, you've spent nearly your entire career in movable partitions. Has it changed much?

NIXON: I'd have to say that most of the principles have been around for

decades, but the idea of flexibility has been improved in recent years. Before, you had the old prefab walls where the whole wall consisted of a single steel panel or what we call the post and panel system with aluminum extrusions and in-fill panels.

In the late 50s and early 60s, the word "demountables" crept in with a new breed of movable partition. This used essentially a gypsum board type panel, applied to a steel framed system. It was the kind of wall you could take down and then reerect with greater ease with improved sound and fire protection.

DIMENSIONS: Is the demountable market—given current economic condition—a growing market . . . a static one . . . or one with a solid future as many in the demountable business claim?

NIXON: Over the long term, this market is still expanding. I believe it will continue to expand more dramatically because the benefits are so solid starting from the low initial cost to the life cycle advantages.

It's actually less expensive to put in than a standard drywall—

DIMENSIONS: You'll get some solid disagreement from drywall people on that claim, won't you?

NIXON: Perhaps. But we've analyzed it and we can install a demountable wall on a first-time basis less expensively. And that's only the beginning.

DIMENSIONS: As a contractor

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selling demountables, what are the true advantages to the owner?

NIXON: I think a contractor should emphasize the lower initial cost, the faster construction time which allows for earlier occupancy, the flexibility on future change options, and then, of course, a demountable qualifies for the investment tax credit which means that United Sam, in effect, pays for 50% of the installation.

DIMENSIONS: When a contractor goes in with the idea of getting a demountable system spec’d, is it all that vital that he brief himself on the investment tax credit? These construction service buyers are not all that unso-

phisticated . . . they know about investment tax credits, don’t they?

NIXON: A lot of people in the building process aren’t using the investment credit as well as they should. You’re dealing with an owner who often, doesn’t understand the full implications. Then, too, there are the architects, designers, engineers who—often by their own admission—aren’t the greatest businessmen.

No, as a selling contractor you must shoulder the communication function and tell them. It’s a good story but it needs to be told in full.

DIMENSIONS: It sounds as if you’re saying that contracting is not

just construction anymore?

NIXON: If it ever was that simple. As a contractor, we must keep abreast of financing and business benefits as well as new technologies, products and systems.

DIMENSIONS: A moment ago you said “demountables” crept into the language and how flexibility gained in importance. What did you mean by that?

NIXON: Well, everything is pointing toward greater flexibility, isn’t it? I mean you will need changes over the life of any building. When a corporation builds its own building with plans

to occupy it, flexibility becomes very, very important.

They want to be in a position to change with changing needs. That involves life cycle costing—yet keeping the building interior abreast of modern office design and efficiency. You have to be able to change to accommodate those kinds of needs at an affordable cost and with minimal disruptions to the owner.

DIMENSIONS: If demountables have all those enormous advantages why then has it not overwhelmed the interior building market . . . why must it be constantly promoted . . . why are there only a few manufacturers in it?

NIXON: Well, first of all, tradition is difficult to break. The market admittedly is still speculative and it's a tough market. Plus, we're dealing with a new generation of people who are not all that familiar with the tremendous improvements in product, technology, life safety and esthetics.

We look back 10 years and note that we must promote the whole principle of demountables over again. Marketing this approach—as with any system—remains a never-ending process—

DIMENSIONS: —and you still see a strong, viable market for demountables? One continuing despite inflation, high interest, energy, etc.?

NIXON: The only reasonable answer is "yes." More and more contractors are becoming interior systems contractors—and this is in response to a buying market that will support that concept.

The systems approach has been talked about since the early 60s but it wasn't accepted initially. The time may now be ripe.

DIMENSIONS: You mean packaging?

NIXON: Absolutely. The one-service contractor will continue to exist all right, but it'll be an increasingly marginal existence. The industry is going to the specialist in preparation for a head-on matchup with the latest technology and design.

We're looking at a form of renaissance really. Traditionally we've had paint and vinyl and there is much to be said for these coverings. But today we're getting involved with new materials such as woven fabrics, needle punch fabrics and a whole host of other finishes to walls, ceilings and floors.

At the same time, the interior contractor is becoming more than someone who merely divides space or working areas. He's responsible for incorporating desk tops, book cases, hang-on capabilities.

He's looking at new ceiling systems where designers are no longer satisfied with the standard 2 x 2 or 2 x 4 lay-in ceilings. Designers now are going for varying geometric possibilities, linear

and slim line grids. With open space they're looking at high acoustical performance offered by Fiberglas, thicker mineral tiles also with high acoustical properties and new finishes.

DIMENSIONS: It's been said, though, that furniture dealers are running off with a preponderance of the open office phenomena. Is this true?

NIXON: Unfortunately it is true. They're not contractors at all but they

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have moved in with great strength because they see the opportunities and they're already in position to make a move.

DIMENSIONS: But how do you see stopping them? Contractors nod that the open office plan offers certain advantages but they acknowledge that it's within the purview of furniture dealers who apparently are in a better profile when it comes to providing furniture?

NIXON: At this point—where no one has dominated the market yet—we are in a position to take over this renaissance as an industry. Furniture dealers aren't contractors; we are. And as members of the construction industry, we understand the process and can better relate to other system con-



tractors such as electrical, plumbing, HVAC and the like.

DIMENSIONS: But wall and ceiling contractors for the most part are not moving into open offices. A vacuum exists, doesn't it?

NIXON: Vacuums never exist for long. Someone always moves into a vacuum. We contractors simply must wrestle that business back. We have access to the primary manufacturers, much better than do furniture dealers. Furthermore, we can offer open office services in combination with ceilings, floors, and demountables, drywall—in short the whole interior.

DIMENSIONS: But, Mike, where is the trend right now? It's been said by some rather well-known office planners that open office landscaping has lost whatever luster it had . . . that people who work in them just don't care for open offices all that much?

NIXON: Open office planning hasn't died. It was over promoted

maybe and, yes, there is a definite trend back to traditional interior layouts. But there's still plenty of open office business.

DIMENSIONS: Let's touch on a touchy point—fire. With traditional space barriers eliminated and the new fabrics, a fire could sweep through an open office pretty much unrestricted, couldn't it? I mean, there is an element of fire, smoke, toxicity, that sort of danger?

NIXON: That's the very thing I alluded to when I said the contractor is in a much better posture to coordinate with other construction groups. We are part of the industry that is deeply conscious of fire control in buildings. Our walls are fire rated . . . we compute fire ratings on our assemblies. We've grown up with fire safety in mind.

The best feature of drywall and plastering is the ability to retard fire. Look at your current open office and you have a tremendous amount of wood, fabric—all kindling is a rapidly spreading fire.

DIMENSIONS: But your furniture dealers can't be completely oblivious to the fire threat?

NIXON: For the most part, they are. And fire inspectors or fire marshalls don't exert jurisdiction when the partition doesn't go up to the ceiling—and less than ceiling high screens, combustible or not, don't contain a fire.

DIMENSIONS: What is the alternative? Should we do away with open offices?

NIXON: No, the open office has been around for decades. Even with traditional walls or demountables, there is a need for consideration of physical fire barriers as well as the recognition of types of finishes going

into buildings. Woven fabrics and wood simply need fire treatment—and no one should be permitted to sacrifice safety for esthetics.

In an open office, there is a certain need for sprinklers or a reasonably acceptable alternative. Regardless, you should plan for fire safety because the law of averages will catch up ultimately.

DIMENSIONS: If a contractor were taking a long, serious look at demountables and open office work what would be his best course of action? How would he go about getting into the business?

NIXON: You have a certain criteria for technical personnel and for maintenance of an inventory. When an experienced contractor tells you that you must carry a specified level of inventory in order to respond quickly he's telling it like it is.

You must commit capital to a demountable venture. The manufacturers of the best system generally deal with authorized contractors. They're jealous

of their product's reputation and they want competent installers.

Consequently, before there's any commitment of money or manpower a contractor should go on a study program. He needs to talk to experts, get involved on a small basis and learn the trade, so to speak, about hollow metal, glazing, hardware, wooden doors and decorating. He must also be prepared to be an aggressive promote;

DIMENSIONS: Short of that course of action, what about hiring expertise?

NIXON: Yes, that can be done successfully. Many have done it. It's essentially one workforce—well managed—that does it all.

If you don't have it yourself then hire someone with the expertise . . . and manage that individual well.

Business is business—and contracting is one of the better businesses.