Are you tired of the commodity ceiling and wall rat race? Would you like to get more specialty work which is less competitive and potentially much more profitable?

Well, you can, but wishing won’t make it so. Some advance planning now and a timely systematic approach to new specialty ceiling or wall projects can do the trick.

As in other endeavors, knowledge is the key to success. So your first step is to find out as much about specialty systems and their installation requirements as you can. And, don’t wait until bidding time—do it today! Most specialty ceiling manufacturers have literature samples and some offer extensive construction detail drawings, detailed material and installation specifications.

Before The Takeoff

Send away for these today and when you receive them set them up in indexed binders or an indexed file where they are accessible when you need them.

We all know the admonition about the early bird and the worm. It is especially appropriate in winning specialty ceiling system jobs. The estimator who starts before or at the beginning of the bidding period has enough time to look at a complete set of plans and specs, prepare a detailed takeoff and estimate, clarify questions with contractors, architects, engineers and the manufacturer. He is the one who stacks the odds in his favor. He is bound to do better than the operator who waits for the last minute to

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take off, comes up with an approximate square foot material price from the manufacturer, and an eleventh hour labor estimate.

**The Takeoff**

Start with a complete set of contract documents. These generally include architectural, mechanical, electrical and structural plans plus specifications including the ceiling themselves, related trades, as well as general and special conditions.

Familiarize yourself with the project by reading the general and special conditions of the specifications, the ceiling specifications and other applicable tie-in sections. Make notes as to special requirements or items to be further investigated or qualified in your bid. Then briefly look over each drawing and familiarize yourself more closely with those relating to the ceilings. Make notes of anything you’ll need to refer to later.

Only after this investigation should you start your actual takeoff. While the items to be taken off or calculated vary somewhat depending on the type of system and the ceiling design, here is a suggested checklist:

- Shop drawings and details
- Dimensions of each space
- Area of each space
- Finish ceiling height
- Height of structure from which ceiling is suspended
- Perimeter (moulding and/or cuts)
- Field cuts (rectangular, circular) (for lights, columns, sprinklers, air diffusers, grilles, etc.)
- Vertical breaks
- Column rings
- Window pockets, valances, curtain or blind tracks and their supports
- Curved ceiling areas
- Sloped ceiling areas
- Lineal feet of primary (and secondary) suspension Hangers (numbers, length, extension)
- Accessories (light fixtures, air diffusers, access doors, other specialties if supplied under ceiling specs)
- Who furnishes and pays for temporary heating, lighting
- Who broom cleans area before/after ceiling installation
- Must you furnish “closet stock” of components
- Who cleans out cartons & debris from individual spaces, and from site
- Regular or overtime working hours
- Special scaffolding or other installation requirements
- Special guarantees
- Bonding requirements
- Completion dates and penalty clauses

**Estimate**

If your takeoff has been accurate and complete, preparing the proper estimate will be relatively easy. Make certain you know what centers suspension system components will be required, what is the installation sequence, how do the parts go together, how are field cuts made, how are accessories installed. Assign a labor cost per piece or foot for each major component to be installed.

Unless you or someone in your organization has had experience installing the system in question, arrange for the manufacturer's local representative to stop by with a sample system assembly to demonstrate how the system is installed. Ask the representative if there is a nearby installation in progress that you can see. The familiarity you will gain will improve your ability to accurately estimate installation costs.

Find out what the normal waste factor is for each component. Learn whether you can purchase certain components to specified lengths or if you must depend on standard lengths which may necessitate purchasing a larger quantity than you actually
need. One manufacturer of linear ceilings, Levolor Lorentzen, furnishes linear panels and screens in 2’ to 16’ length in ¼” increments without additional charge in the quantity the contractor requires.

It may help to ask the manufacturer’s representative how many square feet of the system can be installed per man day under average installation conditions. Use this as a rough check only after you have independently estimated installation costs. Find out if special tools are recommended to facilitate cutting, fastening or other installation operations.

The best way to estimate labor on a system with which you are not very familiar is to assign a cost to each operation. Here are some labor operations common to most systems. Those less frequently encountered are shown in parenthesis.

- Distribution of material
- Scaffolding
- Layout
- Fastening to base construction
  Hangers
- Carriers—Primary Suspension
  (Bridging/Cross Bracing/Framing for lighting etc.)
  (Acoustical blanket or insulation)
  (Secondary Suspension)
- Ceiling panels or tiles (Splices)
- Field cuts—(recessed troffers)
  fixture stems/canopies, sprinklers, smoke detectors columns, vertical breaks, pockets, expansion joints, special conditions
- Perimeter cuts—at walls, partitions, intersections with other materials, window pockets, curtain and blind track etc.
- Cleanout

If you follow this thorough approach, you’ll not only be confident of your estimate but knowledgeable about the specialty ceiling being bid, as well. Armed with these assets you’ll be in the best position to successfully negotiate for the order.