Drywall Installation
Productivity Boosted

At New Sears Headquarters

It is one of the biggest and highest profile drywall contracts in the country: an 18-month, multi-million dollar job covering drywall, plaster, doorways and acoustics for five buildings that will serve as Sears Roebuck & Co.'s new corporate headquarters in Hoffman Estates, Illinois.

Responsibility for the project rests with M. Ecker & Company and its subcontractors. Ecker, one of Chicago's largest paint and drywall contractors, is subcontractor to Schal Associates.

52,000 Lineal Feet of Drywall

By any measure, the job is substantial: 52,000 lineal feet of partition, 2.5 million square feet of drywall and liner, 104,000 feet of drywall track, 1,000 doors and frames, 4 million cubic feet of scaffold, 5,000 square feet of GRG fascia (Glass Fiber Reinforced Gypsum), 18,000 lineal feet of shaft wall and 400 columns.

Unlike Sears' former home in the world's tallest building, the new headquarters is a five-building, pinwheel-shaped complex, erected on a 786-acre site in the northwest Chicago suburb of Hoffman Estates. Building heights range from four to six floors and vary in size from 60,000 to 100,000 square feet.

To prepare work areas, M. Ecker project managers and subcontractors carefully review blueprints to make sure materials and equipment are located where they'll be most accessible to crews.

Such a configuration presents special challenges for a wall and ceiling contractor. In a high-rise, a contractor moves floor by floor and quickly establishes a productive work pattern. Stocking tools and materials in a central area is a relatively simple task.

At Sears' new location, however, M. Ecker and its subcontractors face what amounts to several different projects at once.

To handle the job, M. Ecker deploys about 70 of its own tradesman for framing, shaft liner, lath and plaster, plus an equal number of subcontractors to handle drywall hanging and taping, heavy gage welding and installing GRG.
Trackfast, the new drywall track fastening tool works without hoses, doesn’t misfire and holds up to 35 pins.

**Labor Cost: $117/minute**

That’s a lot of manpower. With an average cost ranging from $40-60 per person per hour (including salary, benefits, overhead, etc.) productivity is at a premium. Every minute costs about $117. Just 15 minutes each day spent searching for materials, repairing tools or setting up equipment could add up to thousands of dollars in lost time.

To make sure crews are most productive, M. Ecker insists that its subcontractors’ project managers go to great lengths to assure proper job planning, material placement and tool selection.

“We think about men, materials and tools. And we try to be around to make sure workers have what they need—even to the point of making backup tools available,” explained one supervisor. “We also make sure the job site is clean at quitting time and set up for the next day. One of the costliest errors a supervisor can make is failing to provide the proper tools or sufficient materials.”

The company also boosts productivity by assigning the same drywall crews to each building. Since design is similar among buildings, crews learn quickly what tools work best in each area.

**Fast Tools Make Fast Crews**

Supervisors on the job say one tool in particular has increased productivity in the fastening of 70,000 feet of drywall track—as much as 300 percent in some cases. It’s a cordless drywall track fastening tool called Trakfast, and it’s made by ITW Ramset /Redhead, Wood Dale, IL. (Ramset/Redhead is a division of Illinois Tool Works, Glenview, IL.)

The fully automatic drywall track fastening tool combines the lightweight and cordless portability of powder actuated tools with the speed of pneumatic tools.

**Fasten Track Anywhere Without Hassles**

According to tradesmen who use the tool daily, “Trakfast is three time faster than the single shot tools we’ve used. It’s as fast as the pneumatic tools—and a lot easier to handle.”

The M. Ecker tradesmen handling the drywall track installation say that for all their power and consistency, pneumatic tool air hoses and compressor tanks can be quite cumbersome. Besides snagging scaffolding, studs and poles, pneumatic hoses typically reach only 100 feet; operators often must stop to move tanks and hoses and set up again.

“Without those hoses, I can fasten track anywhere: in tight areas, around corners, even in ceilings,” says one user. “And it doesn’t waste time and pins with misfires.”

Even the best single shot tools may waste 15-20 percent of their loads. On a job this size, that can get to be very time-consuming and expensive, say M. Ecker supervisors.

And for those overseeing crews working for $117/minute on one of the biggest drywall jobs in the U.S., wasted time and wasted materials is a decidedly unproductive option.