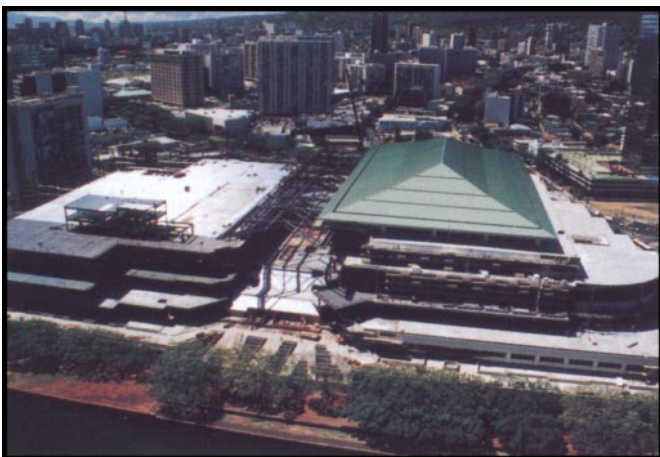


FIREPROOFING

A Dirty, Messy and Thankful Job

**But It Can Turn a Profit If
 You Know How;
 Here's How Anson
 Industries Does It**



The Hawaii Convention Center in Honolulu was a \$3 million contract, involving 77,000 bags of fireproofing material.

“Contractors don’t applaud when they see the fireproofing crew come,” says Pat Gercon, sales manager, Arming-Johnson Company, San Francisco. “It’s messy, hard to control and can slow all the other crews down.

It’s also a job difficult to do right. “Training is a big factor,” Gercon explains. “But we don’t find a lot of apprentices who want this dirty job day in and day out. It’s not very glamorous and, unlike the drywaller or carpenter, the drywaller can’t point to his finished work, which gets all covered up.”

Furthermore, says Gercon, “Fireproofing is not something you generally market. A certain building size and occupancy rate dictates whether it’s required or not. It’s something people feel they have to have, and they tend to look at it as a necessary evil.”

Making Money

Little wonder, then, that many contractors also tend to look at fireproofing as a necessary evil, a

By Michael J. Major

relatively generic service they have to offer, and so often offer it as a loss leader to help sell the rest of their package.

But this is not the attitude at Arming-Johnson. "We make money at it," Gercon says. This is the same attitude of Arming-Johnson's sister company, the Vertecs Corporation in Redmond, Wash. Both are subsidiaries of the Melrose Park, Ill.-based Anson Industries.

So, how do you make money at this basically commodity type of work?

"The first level is in the estimating," Gercon says. "You have to choose the right UL design with the minimum amount of thicknesses required. You should investigate the different UL numbers and assemblies to save on thicknesses of steel. Understanding the UL factor and design helps us become more competitive and increase our margins."

"There is a combination of things you need to do to understand the intents of the requirements, such as the hourly ratings for the steel," adds Vertec's Estimator/Project Manager Greg Loper. "Another key aspect is to be able to recognize the difficulty of the projects, not just how it looks on a piece of paper but how it's actually going to be in reality.

"Therefore, when you look at the drawings, you can know just what the problems will be in the field. A lot of contractors know this and come to us for just that reason. And we do all we can to help them with their concerns so that they in turn will favor us with negotiated work, which we prefer over the bidding process."

Another important dynamic to minimizing waste and maximizing profits in fireproofing, Gercon says, is through controlling waste. “As opposed to other trades, such as carpentry, which might be 70 percent labor and 30 percent material, fireproofing involves only about one-third labor to two-thirds material,” she says.

Waste can happen through using extra thicknesses over what is required by the rating, spraying in areas not needing it, overspraying structural steel onto the deck and bouncing spray off the steel so it lands on the floor.

“It’s not easy to find nozzle men who are really good at what they do, for, to spray overhead for years on end can cause wear and tear on a man,” Gercon says. “However, we pride ourselves on being able to keep our good nozzle men with us for many years; they’re the key to success. They know that, ultimately, their job is to save material, for it can be wasted easily. A training program for



sprayers is in place, so they can work their way up through the ranks.

The Right Stuff

Finding the right material is also an important economic consideration.

“We use a lot of material and don’t tie into any particular brand,” Gercon says. “We feel that, because of our experience, we’ve found ways to choose the best combination of material to work to our advantage.”

Nevertheless, both companies do have a focus on W. R. Grace’s products. They work with their supplier to come up with a wide range of different density products. Some are gypsum and some are cement based.

“At times we actually trowel hard coat material over the top,” says Vertecs Field Superintendent Russ Wilson. “The majority of the fireproofing is concealed, but, in certain applications, when it is exposed to the public view, we dress it up with attractive looking sealers.”

Adds Wilson, “We pride ourselves on maintaining state-of-the-art equipment, typically high-grade, modified plaster pumps. We’re always trying dif-

ferent techniques and staying up on improvements.”

Quality and efficiency is how these two companies differentiate themselves from their competition.

“We know that fireproofing can create a mess, and that any delays on our part can slow down the entire project,” Gercon says. “We make big efforts to get everything done on time, if not before, and we thoroughly clean up as we go along. Nobody wants to be there when we’re spraying, but everybody wants to follow us as quickly as possible.”

A job that was one of the hardest and most challenging, especially in main-

taining high efficiency, was the Hawaii Convention Center in Honolulu. Gercon reports that this \$3 million contract, involving 77,000 bags of material, was for a building that “was like a

high-rise that was laid on its side. It takes up a whole city block.” Moreover, this five-story steel structure was erected “billboard style” so the spraying all had to be accomplished as a whole,

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instead of one story at a time. “We had several crews spread out over the city block working together,” Gercon says. “And on top of that, we had to manage the job from San Francisco.”

In this big job, as in all others, Gercon says, “We track really well for cost control. We know just how many bags we spray and what it costs, so we know we’re making money and it’s not just a guess.”

On The Fast Track

Vertecs has had a number of interesting fireproofing jobs as well. One of their biggest challenges was at the Everett Boeing plant in 1991.

“At that time it was the biggest fireproofing job in the country, and it was a fast-track job,” says District Manager Freeman Boyett. The \$2 million job, requiring 110,000 sacks of material, was spread over two six-story buildings and a large cafeteria. The buildings were built around a substation, which made for a unique construction situation. Up to five spray machines were running at any particular time. And, since much of the job was accomplished in the dead of winter, extensive tarping and heating of the floors were needed to get the required temperature. The job was completed in nine months.

A more recent Vertecs job was the

expansion of an existing Boeing building used to build Boeing 737s. “This is probably one of the most difficult jobs we’ve ever done, though it was not terribly large in terms of bags,” Boyett says. What made the project so difficult was that it had to be accomplished over the 737 fuselages. The Boeing operations could not be held up, so a mobile platform on rollers had to be erected to move in and out of the plant, with most of the work done at night. Work was done amid many steam and electric lines and other duct work in a confined space. Some 40,000 bags were used.

Another fast-track job was a regional justice center, combination courthouse and jail in Kent. “It had a unique


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rotunda that made it a challenge for access to spray,” Boyett says. “In addition, we had 14 cellblocks.” The 40,000 bag, \$433,000 job took about a year.

The most recent big project, which just finished as this magazine headed to the printer, was a \$500,000, 20,000-bag

job for the Overlake Christian Church, the largest church in the Northwest United States, located in Redmond, Wash. About two thirds of the work took place in the auditorium that seats 6,000 people. Scaffolds were erected for the 50 foot high roof deck, and the sloping balcony was a challenge for access.

Although many contractors do only fireproofing, Gercon says, “We have an advantage in being able to put the entire package together for the customer, rather than adding another sub.”

In summing up, Gercon says, “Fireproofing is not a glamorous trade, but, if you do it right, it can be a profitable one.” 

About the Author

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