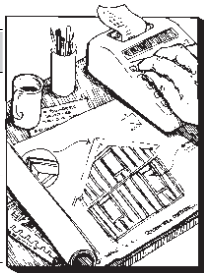


Downtown Jobs

by Sal Alfano



Commercial renovation presents the builder with a unique set of problems. Anticipating trouble and paying close attention to details can save you time, money, and aggravation.

Visibility

Commercial work, especially in a downtown business district, is highly visible to a number of regulatory agencies. Owners anxious to get the work started sometimes pressure a builder into starting before all the permits are approved or even applied for, but this can be a big mistake. It doesn't pay to alienate your local construction review board, or the building, electrical, or fire inspectors. Bring them into the job early, and you'll avoid problems later on.

Remember also that some of the eyes watching the project will belong to OSHA. They are unlikely to overlook something that's right under their noses. Make sure you comply with all OSHA regulations and consider participating in a voluntary inspection if possible. It's best to keep on the good side of these guys.

In addition to securing the safety of your workmen, you may be required to protect pedestrian and automobile traffic. Building and maintaining barricades or temporary walkways will add to your costs, and your liability insurance may increase depending on site conditions and contract requirements.

Finally, for those looking for something to steal, a downtown construction site offers the perfect opportunity. Securing equipment and materials can get elaborate—chain link fences, site trailers, night watchmen—but even carrying your tools back and forth to the truck and locking and unlocking them each time can increase labor costs. And any actual theft, of course, will hit you in the pocketbook.

Site Conditions

Storage space in commercial buildings is often at a premium. Because there is often a lack of outdoor space, you may have to store the better part of your materials in a remote location—either off-site, or someplace like the basement of the building. Either way, additional time and effort are required not only in the initial unloading, but on a daily basis, since your crew will have to carry materials back and forth every day. One way to beat this is to stage your deliveries so that only the material you need immediately is on site at any given time, but this requires closer supervision and can result in costly shortfalls and emergency runs to the supply house. If the job is difficult to reach—above the second story, for example—loading and unloading will be more difficult and therefore more expensive.

Similar constraints govern the work space. If it's cluttered it will take your crew a longer time to perform the work since they'll be threading their way through a maze of obstacles and people, or moving things from one

side of the room to the other and back again. Labor costs will rise proportionately.

If the owners insist on business-as-usual—and many cannot afford to shut down for the entire time it takes to complete the job—you may have to make some adjustments. Some power equipment may be too noisy to use during certain hours. Or you may not have access to all parts of the building at all times.

You will also have to take greater care in protecting the owner's furniture and equipment, particularly if it can't be moved from the workspace. Routine cleanups must be more thorough and frequent. And you'll have to maintain tight control of electrical, plumbing, and HVAC subs so as to minimize the inconvenience to the owner's business.

Another thing builders sometimes forget is that getting rid of construction debris can be more difficult in a commercial setting. If you're downtown, you won't be able to make the huge scrap heap you're accustomed to on more rural sites. Usually, debris will need to be carted off more frequently in smaller loads. This means increased expense from the hauler, plus more time spent by your people getting the trash ready for pickup.

Time Constraints

Sooner or later, the mere presence of your crew becomes an inconvenience to the owner, who has a tendency to forget that this project was his idea in the first place. Owners experienced in renovation will generally insist on steeper penalties for failure to complete on time, and you will probably have to figure in some overtime to meet the timetable.

It's especially hard to "buy time" from a commercial client, especially if your completion date is tied to a "grand opening," that has been advertised well in advance. Whereas residential clients can usually work around you for a few days if you run over schedule, a commercial client is more likely to view schedule overruns as lost business, which means lost revenue, which means trouble with a capital "T."

To guard against this, plot out a realistic schedule right from the beginning, when it's still possible to bargain for time. Once you're under way, make sure your materials and equipment are ordered in plenty of time so you're not delayed by shortfalls. Impress upon your subcontractors the importance of timely completion, possibly through the use of retainage or penalties. And be sure to mention your planned use of overtime or evening and weekend hours with the people who will actually do the work—your crew. If they're unwilling to change their routine, you're out of luck. ■

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