

WARNING!

BY EARLE GOODWIN

Project specs may contain hidden gems

Use a job's specifications to your advantage



The key document in any construction project is the specification. It is where the designer spells out his plan to achieve the owner's vision in full. It forms the basis of your quote and, if your bid is successful, takes its place as the master document for the contract.

That said, it is obvious that the documents comprising the specification must be thoroughly read and correctly interpreted if you are going to get full value out of your contract. Not only will you avoid fights over extras and change orders, you may also find additional work buried in the specification.

Getting into the spec

According to Lou Hiemer, regional manager with Public Works and Government Services Canada (PWGSC) Maintenance Management, "The biggest problem with the contracting community at large is that they don't understand specs."

Specifications can be large, intimidating documents. Working under tight deadlines, it is tempting to just skip to the electrical section and

quote on the work found there. (In some cases, the electrical section is the only one that will be sent to you.) Even worse, some contractors just quote from the drawings, which, Hiemer warns, are always overruled by the text in the spec.

Keep in mind that a specification is a comprehensive document. Just as every element in a building is important to its integrity, every section of the spec works with its counterparts

space as Division 27. New divisions were also created for Integrated Automation (Division 25) and Electronic Safety and Security (Division 28).

Acceptance of MasterFormat 2004 has not been quick but, like it or not, history has shown that it will be adopted. PWGSC has already made the switch to MasterFormat 2004. Others will follow, though it will take them awhile to get out of a 40-year-old habit.

The National Master Specification (NMS) is the most comprehensive master specification in Canada; each section serves as an easy-to-use framework for writing construction project specifications. It is owned and revised by PWGSC, which co-ordinates its review by standards organizations and the construction industry. The content is clear, concise and precise, reflecting the expertise of many of Canada's foremost authorities on specifications, contract documents and construction technology.

to create the overall design. No section is meant to be read on its own: you have to be able to see the big picture to understand the intent.

If you don't read the entire spec, you could be opening the door to problems down the road. For example, you may miss an important detail in scheduling and find yourself facing delays that could have been anticipated and worked around. At best, when the consultant tells you it was spelled out in the spec, you might be able to point the finger at those who did not provide you with the appropriate section.

But that won't make getting paid for your extra any easier, and is bound to erode any relationship you have with that party—not a great idea if it is the one responsible for approving your work. In most cases, though, you could end up eating expenses that weren't provided for in your bid.

In cases where you receive an incomplete spec, request the missing sections. If you don't get them, Hiemer recommends that you state that anything interfacing with the electrical specification received will result in an extra.

There are also situations where the spec is just plain bad. In these cases, Hiemer suggests not even bidding. After all, it's better to put your efforts into getting work where you will actually make a profit rather than lose it to contract battles.

The order of spec

It's rare, though, to find a truly bad spec these days. This is due, in part, to the creation of master specifications. One of the most common is MasterFormat, which was created by the Construction Specifications Institute (CSI) in 1963. The institute likes to refer to it as "a 'Dewey Decimal System' for organizing the information in project manuals". Since its inception, it has broken a specification into 16 divisions with electrical specs being located in Division 16. This has been the case throughout all its revisions until the latest one in 2004, which they call MasterFormat 2004.

In that revision, the 16 divisions were expanded to 50: 34 of which are active with the remainder kept empty and reserved for future use. Divisions 03 through 14 remain basically unchanged. The major changes were made to divisions 15—Mechanical and 16—Electrical.

Division 16 was moved to Division 26, with the Communications section getting its own

Where to look for opportunities

Though it is arguably among the youngest of the building trades, electrical is also quickly growing and evolving; which, in part, is the reason for MasterFormat's latest revision. And while it may not be readily apparent in some of MasterFormat's division titles, electrical has become an essential component of many sections. This is why, if you're willing to do the research, you can find opportunities sprinkled throughout a specification.

Thomas Dunbar, assistant manager, National Master Specification (NMS) Secretariat, points out that it is critical that you read the four divisions directly related to electrical (Divisions 25–28) and Division 01, which spells out contractual obligations (such as how to present shop drawings). He also says it is wise to investigate the following:

- Mechanical (Divisions 21, 22 and 23) for connections to pumps, air-conditioning units and electric unit heaters.
- Openings (Division 08) for electrical connectors to power automatic doors, etc.
- Equipment (Division 11) to see whether there is equipment, such as stoves, requiring electrical hook-up.
- Conveying Equipment (Division 14) for the electrical components involving dumbwaiters, escalators, lifts, elevators and dock levellers.

In some cases you will be avoiding problems as the project unfolds. In others, you might find work that you normally wouldn't think of doing but are (or can become) qualified to do. As Lou Hiemer says, "There are two ways to make money from understanding the specs. You see full scope of the work and you avoid delays and fights for extras."

From a contractor's point of view, everything in a project begins and ends with the specification. Hiemer says, "People who understand what they are reading come out way ahead."

You should be at least as comfortable reading specs as the general or the consultant. If you're not, you might want to consider investing in some education. It could pay handsome dividends. **EB**

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