

Designing an Efficient Contract Framing Production Area

Too many contract framers use expanded custom frame shop set-ups. Here's how to lay out a basic production area designed specifically for contract framing.

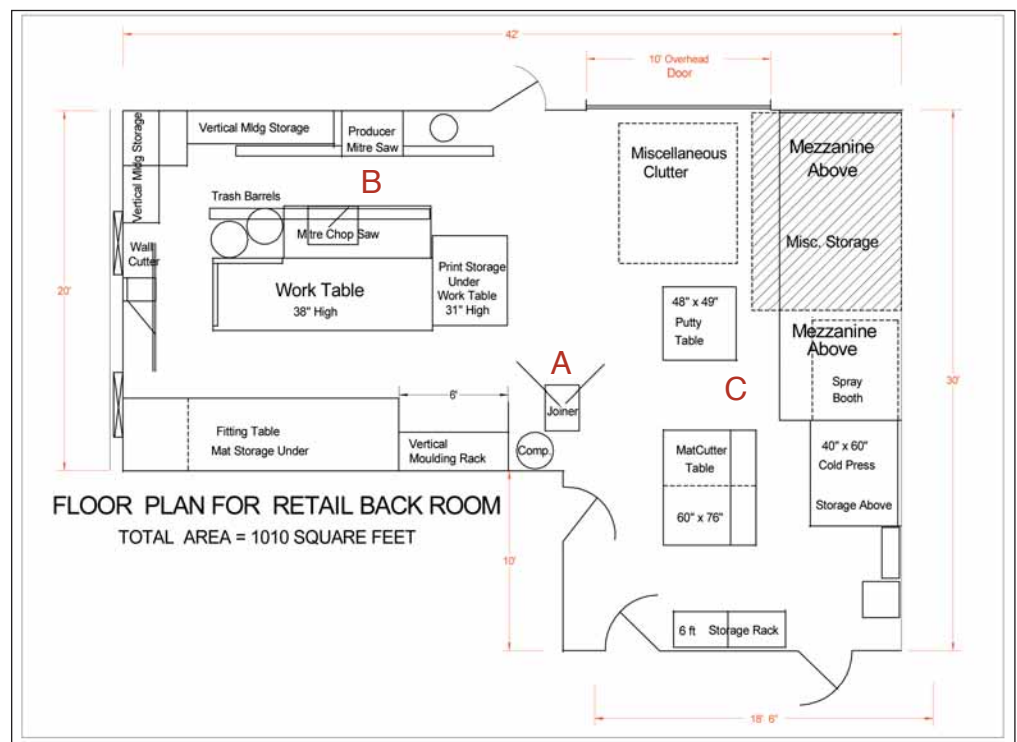
By Jim Burke

As framers move from custom into contract framing, they are often hampered by using what is essentially an expanded custom framing shop instead of one designed to meet the different needs of contract framing. Typically, framers move from custom to contract framing gradually. Sometimes this growth may even be dictated by a change in business that a company didn't initially seek.

Whatever the reason for expansion, as volume work increases, so do the questions. The first is, are you better off doing just volume framing for corporate clients or should you do it as an add-on to a custom framing business? Equally important is, what changes do you need to make in your production area to make you more competitive as a contract framer?

However a framer gets into contract framing, setting

up a basic production area to meet the needs of contract framing is often not adequately planned out. All too often, contract framing is done in a production area that is easily overwhelmed by the needs of con-



The old contract production area, which was an overgrown version of a custom frame shop.



Before (left) and after views looking towards the left wall from the center of the production area (area A in drawings).

tract clients and is unable to provide the efficiency necessary to make production work profitable.

If you're expanding into contract framing or are finding your current contract work hampered by inefficient production, here are some ideas that could help you set up a good basic production area.

Equipment

The machines that are used in a contract production shop are often different from those used in a custom frame shop. For those expanding from custom framing, the amount of difference depends on exactly what equipment is being used for custom framing.

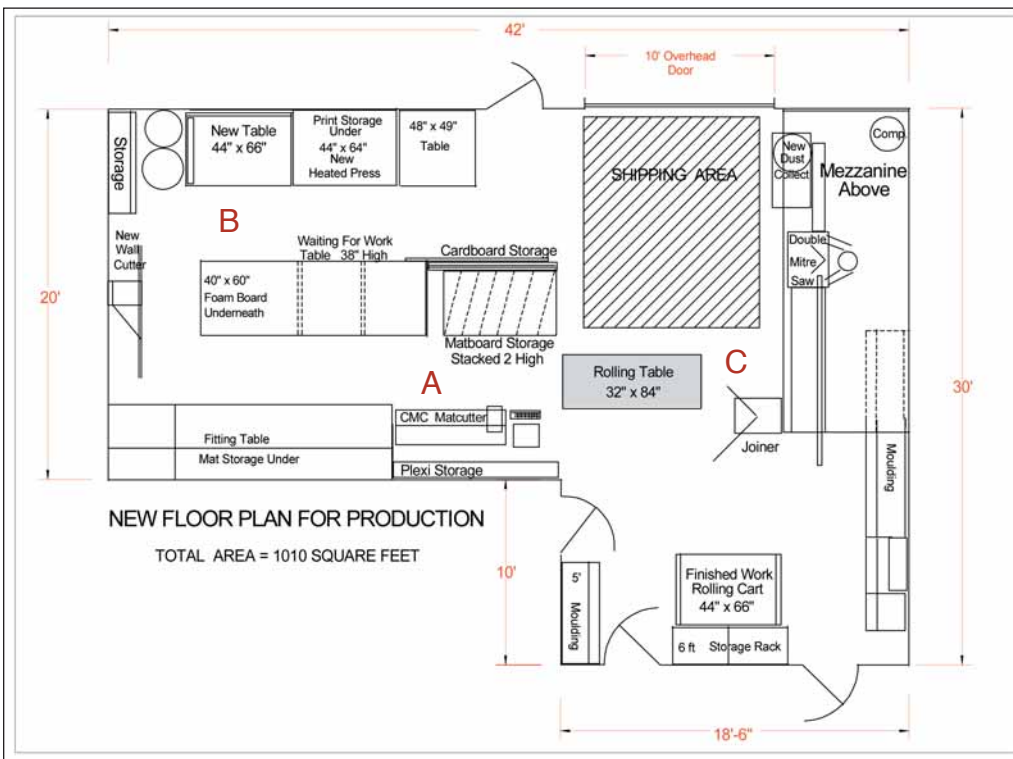
First, you need a saw that can cut accurate miters and can handle up to 1,000 frames a week (200 per day). A saw that can handle 1,000 frames a day is preferable if your volume warrants it. You also need a joiner that can handle the same volume as the saw. A computerized joiner is preferable because it speeds up the entire joining process and offers a faster learning curve for new employees. While a manual joiner can work for a while, for any serious contract work you should be looking to the future. And that means an automatic joiner.

Mounting can also be a challenge if you currently use a spray booth and cold mount press. Even a heat

press can be limiting depending on the volume of your contract work. Alternate methods like wet mounting with a roller press or using heated roller laminators could be required.

Floor Plan

The floor plan of a contract production area is usually different because it has to allow better workflow and provide more storage capability for larger quantities of materials. More employees may also be necessary. Moving to a new facility might be a distinct possibility if your present building doesn't lend itself to contract framing or because the rent is too high based upon a retail location.



The redesigned production area was designed for contract framing, with emphasis on efficient storage and movement of materials and using equipment designed for production framing needs.



Before (left) and after views of the upper left wall of the floor plans (area B in drawings).

Quality

The overall quality of finished pieces produced for contract framing is often not the same as for custom framing. A contract customer's price requirements for a particular job may dictate that the materials used and the overall time spent on each piece are less than for custom work. Perfection cannot always be achieved with an 11"x14" frame using polystyrene moulding, a mat, an image mounted to a backing and

fitted into the frame with glass and hangers—all for \$19.95. This could also include cardboard corners for protection and delivery in one week of 1,000 pieces.

Mindset

The biggest difference is often in the overall mindset of the owner. Pricing is usually done for contract work by figuring material cost plus margins instead of discounting from established retail pricing. Stocking materials is also totally different than for retail needs. More volume of fewer items is the general rule, but keeping these items in stock and having the inventory when you need to finish a job can be a real challenge. You also need to be ready to make the physical changes needed to perform like a production framer, not like a custom framer.



Before (above) and after views looking at the mezzanine area from the lower center of the production area (area C in drawings).

Optimum Production Flow

The two floor plans shown depict a real framing situation. The old floor plan was a working shop that had not been optimized for production flow. It was hampered by the wrong equipment for volume work, poor use of floor space for storage, and cumbersome overall workflow for large quantities of finished pieces. The small size of the floor accentuated the problems.

The space was about 1,010 square feet. The moulding storage and two inadequate saws are shown in the upper left corner of the room. This was also near the glass and fitting area. Mats were stored under worktables and under the straight-line mat cutter table, which is in the lower right portion of the floor layout. A spray booth and a cold mount press were also in that same section of the room.

The space under the mezzanine was not utilized well because it had wasteful storage racks. The overhead door was blocked by clutter and could not easily be used. All materials came in and were shipped via a small door in the center of the back wall. This was not an ideal situation for production framing that was


shipping more than 100 pieces a week.

The new floor plan shows the same shop with some major changes in equipment, floor layout, and workflow. Because of the small size, attention to detail was very important. The racks under the mezzanine were removed and the space allotted for a "used" Pistorius double miter saw, the old compressor, and a new dust collector system. In addition, the moulding storage was moved to the area around or near the saw. The two old miter saws were eliminated. The spray booth and cold press were replaced by a heated press, which is now in the upper section of the floor plan where the old saw used to be. This includes a table for mounting tissue beside the press. All dust is kept as far from the fitting area as possible. All matboard and mounting boards are now stored around the mounting and fitting areas, and the old straight-line mat cutter has been replaced by a CMC. The CMC is also next to the mat storage areas for easy reach. The joiner has been moved near the saw for better flow of cut pieces, and a rolling cart has been incorporated to move those pieces to the joiner. The area in front of the overhead door is now kept clear and is used for storage of product ready to ship. A moveable table on wheels allows for

flexible storage of frame components prior to fitting, and a finished goods cart on wheels helps organize quantities of pieces ready to pack for shipping. A computerized joiner is the next piece of equipment needed to improve overall production.

As you can see, many of the "fixed" tables or built-in storage units were used as-is to reduce the amount of change. These worked quite well where they were, but the top surfaces were changed for improved workflow. It is possible that a better arrangement could be found, but these changes helped increase production by 200 to 400 percent, which was the original target. At some point more floor space would be needed to increase production further. ■


Jim Burke owns Machines Etc., a sales and consulting company based in New Bedford, MA. He started in the picture framing industry with Arquati Moulding in Cleveland as general manager. For the past 25 years he has sold and serviced all types of machinery for cutting and joining frames and cutting mats. He has also sold web control machinery to paper mills, tire cord manufacturing, textiles, plastic film extrusion, and paper converting companies throughout the Midwest.




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