

Comments From a Spec Writer

Liz O'Sullivan's Blog



what an “outline specification” REALLY is.....

[February 22, 2011](#) by [Liz O'Sullivan](#)

I prepare architectural specifications for a lot of school construction projects. At the Design Development phase, we're usually contractually obligated to deliver “outline specifications”... but I'm not sure that everyone involved knows what those are. By everyone, I mean the architect, the engineers, and even (gasp!) the owner's project manager. (Oh, yes, an owner's project manager once said to me at DD, “These sections are just one page.”)

School district projects that I've worked on require that at DD, the design team submit “*outline specifications that identify major materials and systems and establish in general their quality levels.*” At CD, they usually require “*specifications setting forth in detail the quality levels of materials and systems and other requirements for the construction of the Work.*” This language is from the AIA B101, Standard Form of Agreement Between Owner and Architect. If the architect's (or prime consultant's) agreement with the owner actually calls for “outline specifications,” then the architect should make sure that his agreements with his consultants also actually call for “outline specifications.”

The school districts, and many other owners, **don't want** detailed specifications at DD. They want more general, **outline specifications** which don't have details and installation requirements like 3-part specifications do. I personally prefer outline specifications (non-detailed specifications) at DD for all the same reasons that I believe owners do – they are easy to get fully correct and coordinated, and they are easy to read and understand (for owners and contractors and the entire design team), therefore they are very useful, 1) for pricing, 2) for demonstrating to the owner the scope of work, and 3) for design team coordination. DD specs, just like DD drawings, should not be progress sets or snapshots of CD sets in progress. They need to be their own finished, complete, stand-alone thing, **especially** when they are to be used by an estimator for pricing.

An excerpt from the Construction Specification Institute's [The Project Resource Manual](#):

“Outline specifications include information about manufacturers, materials, manufactured units, equipment, components, and accessories. They also describe material mixes, fabrications, and finishes, along with installation, erection, and application procedures. Only a few items from PART 1 GENERAL of SectionFormat are necessary in outline specifications. Reference standards involving products and installation may be listed. Special submittal requirements beyond the norm, such as unusual samples, mock-ups, special testing requirements, and maintenance materials, should be listed. Special qualifications for manufacturers, fabricators, or installers may also be included, as well as a description of any extended or special warranty requirements. Include fabrication and workmanship requirements only when such information has an impact on product or installation grades, cost, or time scheduling. Architectural Woodwork Institute (AWI) grade levels, for example, have cost ramifications and should be identified.

“Outline specifications aid in the design process and help form the basis for revised cost estimates and schedules. As the design process continues, they become the basis for preparation of the project specifications. Outline specifications serve as a checklist for the project team for choosing products and methods for later incorporation into the project manual. Properly developed outline specifications establish criteria for the final contract documents. They also help to eliminate fragmented decision making, which can affect previous decisions and cause unnecessary changes and extra work. MasterFormat Division numbers and titles are the recommended basis for organizing outline specifications.”

My approach for outline specifications is to indicate what products and materials are to be incorporated into the project, and indicate anything about them, that we already know, that affects pricing. For example, if I already know that the owner only wants to allow a few specific manufacturers for a certain product, I will indicate those manufacturers. If the owner or design team has no preference for manufacturers at DD, I will not list any manufacturers. If we already know some product options that will be used, I will indicate those. If we know finishes, I will include those. If we don't know finishes, I won't guess – I just won't indicate finishes. If there are special or unusual installation requirements, I will indicate those. I will not mention typical installation requirements in an outline spec. (“*Lay out tiles from center marks established with principal walls, discounting minor offsets, so tiles at opposite edges of room are of equal width. Adjust as necessary to avoid using cut widths that equal less than one-half tile at perimeter.*” is a pretty typical VCT installation instruction that I will always include in specs at CD, but will **never** include in an outline spec at DD.) If we know that carpet will be installed by direct glue down method, I will indicate that, but will not mention specific installation requirements for that method. I will list any special submittal requirements, and requirements for mock-ups, but will not indicate that product data is to be submitted, because that doesn't affect pricing.

I am not an estimator, but if I were a project manager at a construction company doing CMGC on a project, and I were going to be the person doing CD project management as well as DD estimating, the last thing in the world that I would want to receive at DD is a partially-edited, partially incorrect 3-part full length spec. There are a few reasons for this. 1) A spec with lots of detail implies that decisions regarding these details have actually been made, and that the spec reflects design decisions. Design professionals know that we often haven't actually made these

decisions at DD, so any detailed spec (or drawing) is likely to change before 100% CD. 2) Partially-edited documents are difficult to wade through, and difficult to extract useful information from. 3) I might be spending a lot of time getting a pretty exact price on a detailed thing (that is going to change), when it might actually be a lot more productive (and fruitful) at DD to spend a lot less time, and assign a price range to the item. (I don't know about this for certain – I guess I need to learn more about how estimators work. But this is an educated guess, based on my own work using detailed information from drawings that look like all the design decisions have been made, and preparing a spec section based on that, only to find out that it was a detail taken from another project, put in a set to make it look more complete, and I have to start all over again later, when the design decisions have actually been made!!)

We, as design professionals, have to keep in mind what is to be done with our documents. They aren't merely "deliverables" that are due to our clients. They are to be used – at DD they're to be used for pricing and design team coordination. At CD, they're to be used for constructing.

MasterSpec master outline spec sections can be purchased from Arcom at www.arcomnet.com. Once you've gathered all the design decision information you need, it doesn't take too long to complete an outline set. Or, of course, a full length section could be edited down to be just an outline, but a one-year license for an outline spec library at a cost of several hundred dollars has a pretty quick payback, compared to the hours spent editing full length sections down...

Now, the question of whether outline specifications are useful documents is a question that many specifiers have been asking lately. Many prefer Preliminary Project Descriptions at DD. But that's a topic for another day. This is just all about what we, as the design team, are supposed to deliver to the owner when our contracts require "outline specifications!" Here's hoping that I never have another owner's project manager wondering why my spec sections at DD are only one page long...