

Cleaning Trends

Hard Surface Floors – Reversing a Trend in Floor Care

By David Frank or James Peduto For CMM

Hard-surface floors play a key role in presenting the “right” image for a facility because they are often the first surface someone notices when entering an establishment. Indeed, it’s been said, “If your floors shine, your facility shines,” and that applies to floor care in just about every industry sector: health care, education, business, and hospitality, to name just a few.

And this does not pertain to just building entries, even though they may be the most visible. It also applies to indoor food courts, stores and shopping facilities, airport corridors, pool and fitness areas—indeed, just about anywhere hard-surface floors are found.

However, in many sectors, the appearance level of floors in the United States is on the decline. Traveling from coast to coast on a regular basis, it is clear to me that not only is this true, but it is a growing national trend that may actually be picking up steam in some areas of the country.

Interestingly, we see this happening at the same time that some of the most innovative and productive floor care products, chemicals, and equipment are becoming available. Cylindrical brush technology, for example, along with other tools introduced in the past few years, has made floor care less taxing and more efficient than ever before.

So why is the appearance of floors on the decline? Very simple. It is all about the cost of labor. All cleaning work is labor intensive, but floor stripping, scrubbing, polishing, and refinishing are some of the most labor intensive—and therefore expensive—cleaning tasks. In many situations, as much as 70 percent to 90 percent of the cost to strip, clean, and refinish a floor is just to pay for labor.

This trend can be reversed, but it will require building service contractors (BSCs), working with their customers, to reverse it. And to do so, they are going to have to take a “big picture” approach to floor care. This means they must:

- Determine just how much time, effort, and money the facility wants to invest in floor care
- Evaluate the cost and productivity effectiveness of the floor care products and equipment currently used compared to what else is available in the marketplace
- Develop an effective and ongoing floor maintenance program

Work Backwards First

The facilities that have been most successful at keeping their floors well-maintained on a consistent basis and in a cost-effective manner appear to do so by working backwards first. By this I mean they set goals considering such issues as:

- The budget to be designated just for hard-surface floor care
- The appearance level the facility wants for its floors
- The traffic conditions affecting the floors
- The equipment necessary or now available for floor care
- The floor care skill and training of their staff

This is just the opposite of how most facilities start their floor care program. In most cases, they play a wait-and-see game, waiting to see how the floors look after a couple of months and then scrambling to make improvements when the floor’s appearance becomes unsatisfactory.

Additionally, facilities with successful floor care programs view their hard-surface floors as a building asset. They recognize their importance in providing the “right” image and appearance for their facility. But they also view floor care as a safety and health issue. Well-maintained floors usually help prevent the possibility of slips, trips, and falls. In addition, a well-maintained floor minimizes the chances for dust, soils, and contaminants from being “walked in” from one area of a facility to another.

Worker Productivity

Worker productivity, as it applies to floor care, is all about mechanization, according to Jim Hlavin, head of business development for Tornado Industries, a leading manufacturer of professional cleaning tools and equipment. Hlavin adds that the cost of mechanization has to be “cost analyzed”—meaning that the cost of floor care tools and equipment and the labor costs associated with floor care maintenance all have to be calculated.

According to Hlavin, with these figures in hand, BSCs and facility managers can look for ways to cut the labor costs associated with floor care, and they do this by mechanizing the process to bolster productivity. For instance, for many facilities the only floor care equipment available is a mop and bucket. A mop and bucket may cost \$40 and using it will take one cleaning professional about four hours to clean 2,200 square feet.

However, how much is this really costing? If the cleaning worker is paid \$10 per hour and the floor is cleaned 260 days per year, the actual labor cost to maintain this floor is more than \$59,000 annually.

Substituting the inexpensive \$40 mop and bucket for a \$3,000 floor machine may seem like a big jump. However, the annual cost savings are even more dramatic. This is because the floor machine can clean the same area in less than an hour. On an annual basis, at the same cleaning frequency, the labor costs have dropped to about \$12,000 annually—nearly an 80 percent cut in costs all due to increased productivity.

This means, according to Hlavin, that BSCs and facility managers must look less at the initial cost of floor care equipment and more at the return on investment. He adds that he believes selecting the \$40 mop and bucket over mechanized floor care equipment is one of the best examples of the old expression “penny wise yet pound foolish.” Prevention

Finally, one of the most effective ways to keep floors looking their best while minimizing labor costs involves prevention—preventing floors from becoming soiled in the first place. According to Steven Wright, national sales manager with Van Dike Matting, a leading manufacturer of matting systems, many facilities either forget or simply don’t know how important an effective matting system is in maintaining floors

and keeping them looking their best. However, floor care tasks can be reduced by a multiple of four when effective matting systems are in place.

By this Wright clarifies that if hard-surface floors are normally scrubbed monthly, an effective matting system can reduce that to every four months, a significant cost savings. He adds that this applies to other floor care tasks as well, including regular polishing, stripping, and refinishing.

Wright notes that an effective matting system can prevent more than a pound of dirt or the equivalent of a gallon of water from entering a facility every day. However, this requires that the mats be at least 15 feet long. At 15 feet, the mat is long enough so that shoes will hit it at least three times—removing as much as 90 percent of soil, oils, and moisture.

To achieve this the matting system must have a high level of “scrapability” and absorbability. The scrapability of the mat—its ability to remove soil—is determined by the coarseness of the mat’s fibers. Absorption, to help trap these soils as well as oily substances and moisture, is determined by the thickness or denseness of the mat. The thicker the pattern, according to Wright, the more it will absorb contaminants and the less soil will enter the facility to mar the floors.

Worker Training

There are more than three million workers in the professional cleaning industry in the United States today. I would suggest that probably less than 10 percent of these people are professionally trained in cleaning tasks and procedures and less than 1 percent has any accreditation or certification. This means most cleaning workers do not have a fundamental foundation of technical knowledge when it comes to cleaning work.

And in floor care, because it is so much more labor intensive and involved than most other cleaning tasks, this lack of training can cause a multitude of problem. Not only does it mean that workers may not be performing their jobs as efficiently as they can, but their technique may result in injuries to themselves and others, as well as property damage, and may lead to high employee turnover.

For floor care to improve in the United States, more thorough and professional floor care training must be included. Preventive systems and enhanced floor care equipment and technologies will also need to be implemented to improve the efficiency and quality of a floor maintenance program. With these steps in place we will see an improvement in floor appearance across all sectors.

Bidding on Floor Care

Refinishing hard-surface floors can be one of the most challenging, costly, and labor-intensive cleaning tasks in the industry. Therefore, for BSCs, bidding on floor care work correctly is vital.

The two most critical concerns facing BSCs when bidding on refinishing work are:

- how long the job will take
- how to charge and
- how much to charge

How Long the Job Will Take

There are many variables that can affect how long it takes to refinish a floor. For example, a building with older floors will probably take longer than a newer facility. Other variables that can affect work time include:

- The type of floor to be cleaned: marble, VCT, vinyl, etc.
- The amount and type of soil on the floor.
- The size of the area to be serviced.

The “density” of the work area—how crowded it is with desks, counters, tables, etc.—that may need to be moved or worked around.

The size of the floor machine used (15-, 17-, or 20-inch if rotary). The larger the machine, the quicker the job can be accomplished.

The type of machine used. Cylindrical machines tend to be easier to use than traditional rotary units, reducing fatigue. They also have greater contact pressure, which can dramatically reduce labor time.

How to Charge and How Much to Charge

Small refinishing jobs can be charged by the hour with a setup fee. However, floor work is usually charged by the square foot, not by the hour. According to ISSA*, the charge for refinishing a floor in the United States can range from 15 cents to more than 30 cents per square foot.

Since many of the items necessary to scrub or refinish a floor, such as pads, stripper, and finish, will need to be purchased specifically for each job, charging separately for supplies is good practice. However, in many cases, the client will want one charge for the entire job, which means your final estimate should include this cost.

You can also charge based on the wages you must pay someone to do the work, items purchased for the job, and your desired profit margin. The profit margins can vary from 10 percent for very large jobs to more than 30 percent for a small job. Overhead—referring to supplies and equipment necessary to do the work—usually adds another 15 to 20 percent to the bill.

One rule is to avoid bidding on a job without thoroughly inspecting it first. Many times, a customer will ask for a “ballpark” figure. In these situations, give them a range of charges—from low to high—indicating the final charge will be determined once you actually see the floors.

Finally, experience is one of the best teachers when it comes to estimating floor care charges. Experience will help you avoid mistakes made in the past, help you anticipate problems in the future, and give you a better understanding of just how much work is involved so you can better estimate future jobs.

* International Sanitary Supply Association