

INTERIOR PLANNING

Flooring Fundamentals

Successful floor-care programs often start with attention to detail during specification and installation

By Alan S. Bigger

In recent years, several industry sectors have witnessed record growth in construction spending. But too often, expanding organizations fail to budget enough funds to maintain new facilities properly. As a result, ensuring the appearance of key building areas has become even more challenging.

Throw in the process of value engineering — where items such as floor drains in restrooms are eliminated from a building's design — and the problems mount. Saving money on the construction budget actually might only move the costs to the housekeeping budget.

Nowhere is this situation truer than in flooring selection. Too often, either the wrong type of flooring is specified, or quality floor systems are value-engineered out of a building. As a result, the lower-quality product ends up costing more to maintain over time than the higher-quality one.

But installation is only the beginning of the challenge. To ensure performance and a solid return on investment, managers need to implement a floor-cleaning program that addresses each facility's unique needs.

Laying the groundwork

No matter how hard a manager works to anticipate the challenges certain types of flooring will present, some curveballs are bound to come along. To avoid potential problems, managers should consider several tactics that can prevent problems later.

First, read the installation and maintenance information. This is a simple, yet critical, step. Flooring manufacturers have a vested interest in their floors' performance. So the procedures they recommend aim to optimize both the floor's appearance and performance life.

Next, talk to the flooring installer and the manufacturer's representative. Installers also have a vested interest in the floor's performance and can provide tips on maintaining flooring cost-effectively. It can be especially helpful to watch the installer on the job.

Next, stay in touch with the construction project manager throughout the installation, and

discuss any concerns that develop. For example, during one installation, the installer applied carpet glue on a concrete floor that had not been cleaned first in a facility that was not heated or humidity controlled. Glue will not bond effectively to surfaces that are dirty, too cold or too moist. The project manager immediately addressed the situation.

Finally, identify problems with floors — ripples in carpet, cracks in terrazzo, vinyl tiles coming unglued — as soon as possible after installation. Alert the project manager and installer immediately. Taking pictures of the problem and keeping records ensures that workers correct problems quickly.

Beyond installation

To extend the life of flooring, managers will need to implement the essential elements of a comprehensive floor-cleaning program. Among the critical elements in such a program are these:

Flooring-specific tasks. For carpets, regular vacuuming is critical because the faster that housekeeping crews remove dirt, the longer carpets will last. For hard flooring, such as vinyl composite tile or terrazzo, regular dust mopping and damp mopping remove grit before it can damage the floor's gloss.

Task frequency. In an era of tight budgets, it is common to hear that floor-cleaning tasks are not performed as often as before. Offices that had been cleaned daily now are cleaned on alternate days, weekly or even monthly. No matter the type of floors in these offices, their surfaces will be damaged faster with less-frequent cleaning.

The time to perform tasks. With budgets tight, employees inevitably are pushed to do more with fewer resources, as well as in less time. To adequately maintain flooring, housekeeping crews must have enough time to do the job properly. Ironically, there is a law of diminishing returns. Floors that are cleaned daily take less time to clean on average than floors that otherwise might be cleaned only monthly.

Proper training. Since facilities often feature many different floor types, crews need complete training on flooring maintenance. It is easy to omit this step from the program, but failing to train workers in the proper use of floor-cleaning chemicals or equipment can result in damaged floors. Training should include a review of proper chemical use, equipment considerations, and appropriate cleaning frequencies and safety procedures.

Strategies for long-term success

Managers can implement several strategies that will maximize the cleaning process and enhance floors' overall appearance.

First, provide written cleaning procedures on an easy-to-read checklist. Housekeeping crews can review the procedures after training, in case they forget a specific step or the process for correctly mixing chemicals.

The checklist can hang on cleaning carts or on floor-cleaning machines, and it can indicate the floor-cleaning tasks workers need to perform, as well as when and how often to do so. This tactic will minimize trips back to the cleaners' closet to check procedures, as well as repeated calls to a supervisor.

Second, match the equipment to the task. If a worker is cleaning a wide area of carpeting, a 16-inch vacuum is too small to use effectively and efficiently. Using a 32-inch walk-behind sweeper instead can ensure the floor is cleaned more thoroughly, and it might cut the cleaning time in half.

By the same token, instead of using a riding autoscrubber to clean hard floors, it might be better to use a walk-behind model. The presence of obstacles, such as columns in a hall, might prevent the efficient use of a large riding scrubber.

Third, match the equipment to the flooring type. Crews traditionally have used brooms, buckets, wringers and mops to clean hard floors in restrooms. Today, they often use restroom-cleaning machines that spray the area with cleaning solutions under high pressure. Some machines feature a blower that helps to dry floors more quickly.

Such equipment is ideal for cleaning hard floors and stairwells but not carpets. Instead, crews can use bonnet buffers, small self-contained extractors, walk-behind extractors, or truck-mounted extractors. Also, using a low-moisture carpet-cleaning machine minimizes the drying time between cleaning and use.

Fourth, stay up to date with advances in flooring and cleaning equipment. Managers can achieve this goal by reading trade journals, talking with manufacturer representatives, and attending trade shows.

Finally, network with peers. By talking to peers in comparable organizations who have used certain pieces of equipment, chemicals or processes, housekeeping managers can pick up vital tips that can streamline the process of cleaning floors. This strategy is also an excellent way to gather information about peers' mistakes, such as installing a specific flooring type.

Quality care is essential for the long-term appearance of any flooring. Once installed, it becomes the department's to maintain throughout its life. By following these steps, techniques and ideas, housekeeping managers can maximize a floor's appearance. The result will be a longer performance life and an enhanced return on the investment.

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Avoiding Missteps on Flooring

Mistakes in the selection and installation of flooring can have long-term

consequences for both organizations and housekeeping departments.

For example, in one building, new carpeting extended right up to the exterior door that opened toward a coal-fired power plant. When it rained, coal dust on the ground became a black sludge that visitors carried onto the carpet.

Even though designers had been advised of this potential problem, they specified the use of carpet, not the hard flooring the housekeeping department had recommended. Also, specifiers felt that it was too expensive to install walk-off mats, and they felt mats would detract from the appearance of the carpet, thus losing this opportunity to protect it.

Another organization installed soft-wood flooring in a high-traffic area across which tens of thousands of visitors walk each month. Before installation, housekeeping workers noted that soft wood floors would not hold up under such high-traffic-conditions, but the design team wanted a soft look.

To this day, the floor is a problem to maintain because the heavy traffic gradually has damaged the floor, requiring more maintenance.

Installing the wrong type of flooring can cause many problems for housekeeping crews. And over time, the cost of cleaning it often is higher than the original surface. It is imperative that custodial crews maintain the appearance of floor surfaces, as well as protect them from potential damage. Good planning today can extend the life of the floor, while also maintaining an appearance the managers can be proud of.

— *Alan S. Bigger*