

Utilizing prefab may improve quality, lower costs of projects

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In the past year, Interstates Companies, an electrical engineering and construction, automation and instrumentation company, has made prefabrication an important part of its approach to projects.

"It is an industry trend," said Lowell Dykstra, Interstates prefab manager. "To be competitive, you have to start doing it."

Dykstra cited a project where the company installed 2,000 ft. of conduit underground in a day instead of the typical few weeks — all because of prefab. "It also provides improved safety and quality and decreases time on the job site," he said.

At another job, for a soybean processor in Indiana, the company was able to prefab a large conduit rack off site — at its shop in Sioux Center, Iowa — before being shipped to the job and being lifted in place by crane.

Dykstra said the company really began getting into prefab in October 2003 and found a suitable shop in Sioux Center in January 2004.

"Now, we have a brainstorming session before each job, where we examine the parameters of the job and see just how much work can be done off

site," he said.

Components being prefabricated by the company include pre-spooling wire, bending conduit 90s, building conduit racks, pre-assembling light fixtures, pre-wiring motor disconnects and control panels, preassembling flex and preassembling grounding grids. "There are no limits to the use of prefab," the company said.

In fact, Dykstra said other industries, such as fire prevention, have been using prefabrication for several years, and now with electrical companies jumping on board, those managing or overseeing construction projects will likely see more and more prefab taking place.

Key benefits

According to Interstates operations manager Dave Los, prefab offers four key benefits.

First, he said, is time savings. With key components assembled off site in advance, the time spent on a remodeling or expansion project can be drastically reduced from weeks to days. The reduced time helps customers by shortening the shutdown schedule in addition to reducing the on-site manpower needed by Interstates. Because much of the work takes place in a controlled environment, there are also no

weather-related delays with which to contend.

Second, Los said, is improved cost efficiency. Because key tasks are performed in a controlled environment with easy-to-access materials and no weather delays, prefab can lower the total cost of a project.

"There are also fewer job-site storage and security concerns," Los said, because materials aren't exposed to weather or theft.

Improved safety is the third item Los cited.

The company said working in an off-site environment is inherently safer. Crews don't have to work on elevated platforms, they have the right tools, they aren't working around operating equipment and they can work under controlled conditions. All of that reduces hazards.

Finally, Los said, is improved quality.

In addition to avoiding problems and delays caused by assembling components at the project site, prefab allows for forced planning and pretesting of components before installation, which is a good way to improve the overall quality of the project.

The company said it also offers prefab services to other contractors as well as direct to clients. ■