



Industry-specific contractor eases project management

The biggest laundry chains' corporate engineers are personally responsible for dozens of projects. And companies of all sizes need general contractors for various jobs, from new plant construction to renovations and upgrades of

existing facilities. Process Mechanical Piping and Erection, Inc. is filling the gap for both.

Pinak Patel, corporate engineer for AlSCO, Inc., Salt Lake City, Utah, has worked with PMP&E's Frank Ciucevich for the past 12 years. PMP&E has done a range of jobs for him, from total turnkey projects to small ones. Recently, they collaborated on the conversion of the old Textilease Corp. (now part of UniFirst Corp., Wilmington, Mass.) building in Charlotte, N.C. to a linen laundry.

"The only thing left from the Textilease plant was the boiler," Patel says, describing the shell with which AlSCO began to work. "Frank was instrumental from concept to design to final layout and everything. As general contractor, he was project manager on probably 70 percent of the items, and I oversaw the other 30 percent." Patel would visit the site every other week for its duration, which took almost six months. He communicated largely with PMP&E's superintendent on the site.

A mechanical engineer with 18 years' experience in the business, Patel praises the company for its "understanding of laundry operations and equipment." PMP&E people are highly skilled, safety conscious, and "very well organized, with adequate manpower to tackle from the smallest to the largest jobs. A dedicated, highly skilled workforce can make a big difference in a challenging project on critical timelines."

PMP&E people understand the importance of working after hours and weekends. Most laundry projects, he observes, involve existing facilities, which underscores the importance of not disrupting operations, Patel points out.

Before one of the company's crews leaves a job site, "they finish the project work and wrap up the



AlSCO, Charlotte, N.C.

punch list,” he says. That’s not always the case with contractors, who postpone small tasks and have to return to complete them. In these cases, “it’s often hard to get them back, which costs you a lot of money and frustrates you. Things can drag on for a couple of months.”

With PMP&E’s professionalism and work ethic, the focus is on customer satisfaction, Patel says. Very few contractors concentrate on this, he believes, especially those who don’t get much repeat business. Everyone in a supply chain has to make money, he observes, but PMP&E stands out because their people work to develop relationships with their client base.

The company was invaluable in working with Charlotte authorities. “Their ability to pull permits and facilitate inspections contributed greatly to the success of the total turnkey job,” Patel says. On such a project, these tasks “can become a nightmare.” They are constant processes that require calling city departments and trying to educate their staffs, who will often try to force changes that aren’t cost-effective or timely to job specifications. This puts pressure on PMP&E to make them understand the errors of their ways and grant variances and the company performs well, he says.

“A lot of inspectors just don’t understand what you need to do. They want you to do this or that, and you either do it their way, so you can get the operations running, or spend numerous hours working with the city, explaining why they’re wrong. PMP&E handles this well and that is an excellent credential for them.”

The company also handles surprises well. Once, when PMP&E was replacing a machine over a weekend, they discovered that some headers were in terrible shape. PMP&E responded by performing the repairs without being certain the company would be paid for the work.

“They could have done anything they pleased or even walked away from the job,” Patel says. “The project might have been extended for a couple of weeks or even months.



As a piping specialist, PMP&E ensures that projects avoid dead end runs and use proper valve and pipe sizing for optimal fill times (photo from AlSCO, Yuma, Ariz.).

Instead, they were able to reach me, and they made their own decision to replace the headers.” Later, they worked with AlSCO on the financial details.

PMP&E has sent their people to machinery manufacturers’ training, which improves their ability to install and help start up washers, for example. Machines must be leveled and grouted. Sometimes a manufacturer does this, but most of the time, PMP&E handles it. “Their knowledge of laundry equipment helps ensure installation takes place properly on the first try,” Patel says.

Tandem efforts with corporate engineers in project management

PMP&E oversees projects including expansion, renovations, new plant construction, and new equipment installation.

Rental laundry companies assign project managers to jobs, but as mechanical contractor, PMP&E often performs many traditional functions of that role. Launderers’ engineers “don’t have to spend time holding our hands,” Ciucevich says. Nor must they be present for every weekend task.

Why wouldn’t a chain simply assign local management to this role? Some decisions require engineering expertise and strong knowledge of corporate engineering standards, he says. Generally, plant-based management is tied up with operating



and maintaining their facilities.

Plus, "there aren't enough engineers to go around," he explains. Performing projects proficiently requires experience in the laundry industry, he says, and to perform this function properly, someone should be on-site for its duration. A chain usually can't make that kind of commitment when it has just a few corporate engineers.

This year, it seems their activity is particularly brisk. "Corporate engineers just don't have enough time for all the work," he says. They can rely on PMP&E's experienced foremen, mechanics, and project managers.

The company employs roughly 140 mechanics and foremen. Skilled help comes from PMP&E's facilities at the home base in Peachland, N.C., its engineering office in Indian Trail, and its shops in Greensboro and Valley, Ala.

While the company's background is in textile dyeing, that market is becoming less prominent. "We're doing business with a lot of what's left of that industry in the U.S.," he says, "but now, our business has shifted toward the industrial laundry industry." The transition isn't like learning a new trade, though, because the industries are similarly reliant on large machinery that uses steam, hot and tempered water, and waste heat recovery systems.

Ciucevich has been in this business for over 35 years with

Building the proper infrastructure to provide utilities is a critical part of speeding production and saving labor, PMP&E attests.

laundries and textile dyeing; he had his own company and crews as early as 1971. But he rarely had a lot of people, so he would sub much of his installation work to PMP&E. "I would sell the job, lay it out and hire their crews," he recalls.

About five years ago, he merged his operations with the company. "Lynn Godwin (president) and James Edwards (VP) are very experienced guys. They have resources. They know the textile dyeing and bleaching business, and have learned a lot about the rental laundry industry. So they're very supportive of our operations with industrial and linen plants."

Better, faster, less costly than local contractors

Plant-based management sometimes plays a role by helping to find local people who work as subcontractors for PMP&E. Rarely does it make sense to use a local general contractor, because it's hard to find such an operator who can perform as efficiently. "It's important that the project is done right the first time, quickly and safely by a company that understands the laundry process," Ciucevich says.

Ciucevich sees one other company as a true competitor. Mostly, though, laundry companies consider local contractors as the most viable alternative to the company. In those cases, though, a project engineer is hard-pressed to find someone with the right experience or workforce size to handle the job. And the engineer would likely feel pressure to remain at the site personally for some time, he says.

An engineer who uses PMP&E for project management and local firms for a task or two would not have to stay, however. "We would hold their hands and stay so the engineer wouldn't have to," he says.

Competing against such contractors is usually fairly easy for PMP&E, particularly for longer jobs. "Generally, if it's more than a 2-week job, we can beat them, because we can get in and out faster, while these guys would still be floundering around," he cracks. He recalls a recent job in Florida in which a local firm offered to subcontract for PMP&E on washer and dryer installation and then realized "they bit off more than they could chew."



Subcontractors are sometimes necessary. "Every once in a while, we have to ask someone to do something for us," he says, with PMP&E supervising the firm. Examples include electrical, paving, roofing, and concrete work, such as digging and building a settlement pit. The company does most of its own work, though, even putting stacks on roofs.

Project Manager Carlos Balcita points out that PMP&E is licensed for mechanical and general contracting in many states. This is never an obstacle if the company has yet to obtain a state's approval, because in many cases, licenses are transferable or staff can take classes to get up to speed.

Efforts to maximize safety include drug testing in hiring, and morning meetings to discuss procedures. Subcontractors are quizzed about their safety records and held to PMP&E standards. The company points to its level insurance premiums as evidence of its emphasis in this area.



Ensuring that headers are the proper size for the new washing machines you wish to install is a PMP&E specialty.

Beyond bricks, mortar, metal

While PMP&E is probably best known as a mechanical contractor, the company gets involved in laundry jobs long before their first crew arrives on work sites. To pinpoint the functions the company performs, IL interviewed a long-time PMP&E client, Ryan McDonald. Formerly a senior project engineer for a major laundry chain, McDonald is now with Rite Way Mechanical Installations, Inc.

When planning a new plant, expansion, or major upgrade, what does PMP&E typically do for a laundry company? At what stage of the project do they get involved?

PMP&E would be contacted almost immediately upon the discovery of a new project. They would assist in developing cost effective solutions, as well as giving figures to develop a project budget.

In a typical scenario, I would find a tank and pump system that needs replacement. I would have some surplus equipment I would like to use, so I would call PMP&E to develop a project plan using that equipment. PMP&E would discuss several options for installation, pipe routing and sizing, and other items that would affect cost. A rough budget would be put together and I would approach my managers for approval. This process typically took one to two days.

From PMP&E's Frank Ciucevich: Usually, they establish the timeline and we get involved with helping them with layouts and planning the project. The larger companies do a lot of layouts themselves, they're pretty good at it, because they've always got a lot of projects. Most of the time, though, at this stage, they don't have project engineers assigned to the jobs yet, so they appreciate our stepping in to help them refine these plans. →



We will sweat the details like how closely washers can be placed next to each other, how far away the dryers need to be, and how the monorail system needs to be fitted in. Everything needs to be elevated properly so you don't have any wrecks, or pipe running into monorail. We also look closely at where lights will be, because with all the overhead equipment, it can get a little dark in a plant!

Same for an installation of a new wash aisle. Does PMP&E help you pick the new equipment? Because they know utilities really well, isn't it better to involve them in equipment selection?

We would typically meet with washer manufacturers and develop pricing for 35 to 60 units annually. Such pre-purchasing of washers and dryers ensures the factory has a unit in stock when you need to take delivery and order its replacement.

As far as utilities are concerned, you usually build your process around the business and then find/buy the needed utilities, if more are required. I would be surprised if someone built a laundry around their utilities. If utilities truly limit your growth, you build at a different location.

Why is it important to have someone from PMP&E serve as project manager to assist the company's project engineer on a chain plant job?

Laundry corporate engineers have dozens of projects on their plates. Any supplier that can remove the load from an engineer's shoulders provides great value. By integrating an outside project manager with a corporate engineer, communication increases, issues are reduced within a project, and the supplier gains awareness of upcoming projects by being on the inside and hearing about them. The outside company is also able to give feedback on other things that may lead to new projects as well. When I had a big perplexing issue, I'd call Frank, because nine times out of 10, he's run into that problem before and knows a foolproof way to solve the problem.

Talk about the various types of laundry system retrofits, or replacements that you have done the most. Which are the most difficult?

Retrofitting while a plant is processing is the most challenging. This usually requires plant employees to work close to construction areas or on reduced production schedules. The efficiency of the installation itself can be reduced.

As an example, at one plant that required a new utility dis-

tribution, we had to systematically replace each washer on a line. Every other night, a machine was taken offline, and replaced with a different machine. The new machines came from a shut-down facility, so they had maintenance issues to deal with, as well as an uneven floor, cramped working conditions, and a short deadline.

On the flip side, some plants have wide-open areas, which make it much easier to work and get in and out.

Explain what can go wrong, safety-wise, in construction and renovation, and how you were able to avoid or minimize these various problems.

With employees working within yards of riggers and welders, there is potential for large-scale injuries. Daily communication of where construction work will take place is essential. Daily demarcation of construction areas by tape and other barricades is effective. Tarps and other debris- and welding-flash-deflecting items also work extremely well. Establishing an area for material storage and fitting/welding makes it easy to operate a plant and easier to install the new piping, machines, tunnels, whatever needs to go in.

In your experience, how did piping create problems for laundries? Were pipes often not properly specified? How did PMP&E help?

The main issues were from undersized copper lines that experienced velocity cavitation within five years of installation. I've also seen galvanic corrosion that's deteriorated copper and stainless steel pipe; in one case, this put copper particles into a clean room. PMP&E assisted by identifying the issues and providing correctly sized pipe of the correct materials.

Another common issue was the pressure surge that occurs when water stops or changes direction, known as "water hammer." Other piping companies would install a system without regard for this and other operational concerns, but PMP&E wanted additional business down the road, so they would point out areas of concern on bid documents. This would include avoiding dead end piping runs (where water hammer will occur) and choosing the proper valve and pipe sizing for optimal fill times.

PMP&E also standardized steel piping for water (schedule 10 stainless) and steam (schedule 80 carbon). When comparing quotes side by side, seeing the stainless quoted gave PMP&E a competitive edge. With that pipe installed, you know it will be there for 20 years without issues. **IL**