

Drywall Installers, Ceiling Tile Installers, and Tapers

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Significant Points

- Most workers learn the trade on the job by starting as helpers to more experienced workers; additional classroom instruction may also be needed.
- Job prospects are expected to be good.
- Inclement weather seldom interrupts work, but workers may be idled when downturns in the economy slow new construction activity.

Nature of the Work

Drywall consists of a thin layer of gypsum between two layers of heavy paper. It is used for walls and ceilings in most buildings today because it is both faster and cheaper to install than plaster.

There are two kinds of drywall workers—installers and tapers—although many workers do both types of work. Installers, also called *applicators* or *hangers*, fasten drywall panels to the inside framework of residential houses and other buildings. *Tapers* or *finishers*, prepare these panels for painting by taping and finishing joints and imperfections.

Because drywall panels are manufactured in standard sizes—usually 4 feet by 8 or 12 feet—drywall installers must measure, cut, and fit some pieces around doors and windows. They also saw or cut holes in panels for electrical outlets, air-conditioning units, and plumbing. After making these alterations, installers may glue, nail, or screw the wallboard panels to the wood or metal framework. Because drywall is heavy and cumbersome, a helper generally assists the installer in positioning and securing the panel. Workers often use a lift when placing ceiling panels.

After the drywall is installed, tapers fill joints between panels with a joint compound. Using the wide, flat tip of a special trowel, they spread the compound into and along each side of the joint with brush-like strokes. They immediately use the trowel to press a paper tape—used to reinforce the drywall and to hide imperfections—into the wet compound and to smooth away excess material. Nail and screw depressions also are covered with this compound, as are imperfections caused by the installation of air-conditioning vents and other fixtures. On large projects, finishers may use automatic taping tools that apply the joint compound and tape in one step. Tapers apply second and third coats of the compound, sanding the treated areas where needed after each coat to make them as smooth as the rest of the wall surface. This results in a very smooth and almost perfect surface. Some tapers apply textured surfaces to walls and ceilings with trowels, brushes, or spray guns.

Ceiling tile installers, or *acoustical carpenters*, apply or mount acoustical tiles or blocks, strips, or sheets of shock-absorbing materials to ceilings and walls of buildings to reduce reflection of sound or to decorate rooms. First, they measure and mark the surface according to blueprints and drawings. Then, they nail or screw moldings to the wall to support and seal the joint between the ceiling tile and the wall. Finally, they mount the tile, either by applying a cement adhesive to the back of the tile and then pressing the tile into place, or by nailing, screwing, stapling, or wire-tying the lath directly to the structural framework.

Lathers also are included in this occupation. Lathers fasten metal or rockboard lath to walls, ceilings, and partitions of buildings. Lath forms the support base for plaster, fireproofing, or acoustical materials. At one time, lath was made of wooden strips. Now, lathers work



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mostly with wire, metal mesh, or rockboard lath. Metal lath is used where the plaster application will be exposed to weather or water or for curved or irregular surfaces for which drywall is not a practical material. Using handtools and portable power tools, lathers nail, screw, staple, or wire-tie the lath directly to the structural framework.

Working Conditions

As in many other construction trades, the work sometimes is strenuous. Drywall installers, ceiling tile installers, and tapers spend most of the day on their feet, either standing, bending, or kneeling. Some tapers use stilts to tape and finish ceiling and angle joints. Installers have to lift and maneuver heavy panels. Hazards include falls from ladders and scaffolds and injuries from power tools and from working with sharp materials. Because sanding a joint compound to a smooth finish creates a great deal of dust, some finishers wear masks for protection.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Drywall installers, ceiling tile installers, and tapers learn their trade through formal and informal training programs. To become a skilled drywall installer, ceiling tile installer, or taper, between 3 and 4 years of both classroom and on-the-job training may be required, but many of the skills can be learned within the first year. While there are a number of different ways to obtain this training, in general the more formalized the process, the more skilled the individual becomes, and the more in demand they are by employers.

There are a number of different avenues that one can take to obtain the necessary training. The most common entry route is

to obtain a job with a contractor who will then provide on-the-job training. Entry-level workers generally start as helpers, assisting more experienced workers. During this time, employers may send the employee to a trade or vocational school, or community college to receive further classroom training.

Some employers, particularly large nonresidential construction contractors with union membership, offer employees formal apprenticeships. These programs combine on-the-job training with related classroom instruction. Usually, apprenticeship applicants must be at least 18 years old and meet local requirements. The length of the program, usually 3 to 4 years, varies with the apprentice's skill. Because the number of apprenticeship programs is limited, however, only a small proportion of drywall installers, ceiling tile installers, and tapers learn their trade through these programs.

Other jobseekers may choose to obtain their classroom training before seeking a job. There are a number of public and private vocational-technical schools and training academies affiliated with the unions and contractors that offer training to become a drywall installer, ceiling tile installer, and taper. Employers often look favorably upon these students and usually start them at a higher level than those without the training.

Installer helpers start by carrying materials, lifting and holding panels, and cleaning up debris. They also learn to use the tools, machines, equipment, and materials of the trade. Within a few weeks, they learn to measure, cut, and install materials. Eventually, they become fully experienced workers. Tapers learn their job by taping joints and touching up nail holes, scrapes, and other imperfections. They soon learn to install corner guards and to conceal openings around pipes. At the end of their training, drywall installers, ceiling tile installers, and tapers learn to estimate the cost of installing and finishing drywall.

Training for this profession can begin in a high school, where classes in English, math, mechanical drawing, blueprint reading, and general shop are recommended. Some skills needed to become a drywall installer, ceiling tile installer, and taper include manual dexterity, eye-hand coordination, good physical fitness, and a good sense of balance. The ability to solve arithmetic problems quickly and accurately also is required. In addition, a good work history or military service is viewed favorably by contractors.

Drywall installers, ceiling tile installers, and tapers may advance to carpentry supervisor or general construction supervisor positions. Others may become independent contractors. For those who would like to advance, it is increasingly important to be able to communicate in both English and Spanish in order to relay instructions and safety precautions to workers with limited understanding of English; Spanish-speaking workers make up a large part of the construction workforce in many areas. Hispanic workers who want to advance should learn English. Supervisors and contractors need good English skills in order to deal with clients and subcontractors. They also should be able to identify and estimate the quantity of materials needed to complete a job, and accurately estimate how long a job will take to complete and at what cost.

Employment

Drywall installers, ceiling tile installers, and tapers held about 196,000 jobs in 2004. Most worked for contractors specializing in drywall and ceiling tile installation; others worked for contractors doing many kinds of construction. About 43,000 were self-employed independent contractors.

Most installers and tapers are employed in populous areas. In other areas, where there may not be enough work to keep a drywall or ceiling tile installer employed full time, carpenters and painters usually do the work.

Job Outlook

Job opportunities for drywall installers, ceiling tile installers, and tapers are expected to be good. Many potential workers are not attracted to this occupation because they prefer work that is less strenuous and has more comfortable working conditions. Experienced workers will have especially favorable opportunities.

Employment is expected to increase more slowly than average for all occupations over the 2004-14 period reflecting the number of new construction and remodeling projects. In addition to jobs involving traditional interior work, drywall workers will find employment opportunities in the installation of insulated exterior wall systems, which are becoming increasingly popular.

Besides those resulting from job growth, many jobs will open up each year because of the need to replace workers who transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force. Some drywall installers, ceiling tile installers, and tapers with limited skills leave the occupation when they find that they dislike the work or fail to find steady employment.

Despite the growing use of exterior panels, most drywall installation and finishing is done indoors. Therefore, drywall workers lose less worktime because of inclement weather than do some other construction workers. Nevertheless, they may be unemployed between construction projects and during downturns in construction activity.

Earnings

In May 2004, the median hourly earnings of drywall and ceiling tile installers were \$16.36. The middle 50 percent earned between \$12.59 and \$21.82. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$9.98, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$28.30. The median hourly earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of drywall and ceiling tile installers in May 2004 were as follows:

Residential building construction	\$17.33
Building finishing contractors	16.53
Nonresidential building construction	14.57

In May 2004, the median hourly earnings of tapers were \$18.78. The middle 50 percent earned between \$14.07 and \$24.43. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$10.66, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$28.79.

Some contractors pay these workers according to the number of panels they install or finish per day; others pay an hourly rate. A 40-hour week is standard, but the workweek may sometimes be longer or shorter. Workers who are paid hourly rates receive premium pay for overtime. Trainees usually started at about half the rate paid to experienced workers and received wage increases as they became more highly skilled.

Related Occupations

Drywall installers, ceiling tile installers, and tapers combine strength and dexterity with precision and accuracy to make materials fit according to a plan. Other occupations that require similar abilities include carpenters; carpet, floor, and tile installers and finishers; insulation workers; and plasterers and stucco masons.

Sources of Additional Information

For information about work opportunities in drywall application and finishing and ceiling tile installation, contact local drywall installation and ceiling tile installation contractors, a local joint union-management apprenticeship committee, a State or local chapter of the Associated Builders and Contractors, or the nearest office of the State employment service or apprenticeship agency.

For details about job qualifications and training programs in dry-wall application and finishing and ceiling tile installation, contact:

- Associated Builders and Contractors, 4250 North Fairfax Dr., 9th Floor Arlington, VA 22203. Internet: **www.trytools.org**
- National Association of Home Builders, Home Builders Institute, 1201 15th St. NW., Washington, DC 20005. Internet: **<http://www.hbi.org>**
- Joint Apprenticeship and Training Fund, International Union of Painters and Allied Trades, 1750 New York Ave. NW., Washington, DC 20006. Internet: **<http://www.jatf.org>**
- National Center for Construction Education and Research, P.O. Box 141104, Gainesville, FL 32614-1104. Internet: **<http://www.nccer.org>**
- United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, Carpenters Training Fund, 6801 Placid Street, Las Vegas, NV 89119 Internet: **<http://www.carpenters.org>**