



Bright Idea #1 : Spatula

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Bob Palizzolo, Local 3 Bricklayers and Allied Craftsmen

The problem: picking up tiles

What a difference a cut makes in how a tool can be used! Just ask Boston area tilesetter, Bob Palizzolo.

Working in a tunnel more than 20 feet high, he and other members of Local 3 of the Bricklayers and Allied Craftsmen had to prepare tiles to cover the equivalent of more than four miles of walls. The tiles were a quarter-inch thick and eight-inches square.

Among other tasks, they "buttered" the back of the tiles with "Thinset" glue. (This was usually done on a homemade table set up on scaffolding.) To avoid skin problems from the glue, the workers wore ordinary dishwashing gloves.

"It was hard to pick up the tiles with the gloves. You don't get good dexterity."

After buttering the tiles, they had to pick them up and put them on a nearby ledge, or hand them directly to the person tiling the wall. But the thinness of the tiles, combined with using the gloves, make this very awkward and difficult (see picture above). To lift and hold the tiles, the workers had to pinch them. The gloves only increased the pressure needed.



Holding something with a "pinch grip" requires a lot of force on hand and arm tendons and muscles that weren't designed for this work. If the motion is repeated often, it may cause hand and wrist problems.

The process: learn from others

"I got the idea from an older guy," Palizzolo says. The experienced tilesetter cut the point off trowels to make it easier to use them to pick up cement or grout. The tilesetting work "was kind of a unique situation" but the tilesetters used a trowel all the time. What was useful in one task might work in another.

The solution: turn a trowel into a spatula

Plastering trowels usually have a narrow, pointed tip. Cutting off the tip makes a straight line edge several inches wide. Now the trowel is like a spatula. (See picture below.)

The trowel-turned-spatula can be held with the gloves on, in a relatively-easy grip. It is easy to slide under the tiles on one edge, lifting them like a pancake. The worker then can either lift the tile directly to where the



tilesetter can reach for it, or hand it directly to the tilesetter.

Pinching the tiles is eliminated, and the job is easier to do. Possible injuries are prevented.

It is also easier to do other tasks. "It's good for picking up cement or grout." Palizzolo says. "You can put (the cement or grout) on your other trowel too, more easily."

Using this bright idea....

The trowel can be used in other tilesetting and finishing jobs. It also could be used anywhere that workers have to pick up thin flat objects that don't weight much. Different-sized trowels can be used for larger and smaller objects.

Making the handle diameter greater - by adding a rubber sleeve or soft cover - would make it easier to grip the trowel, especially with gloves on. Larger handles also reduce how hard people have to hold onto things. The decreased force reduces the risk of wrist and hand injuries, especially if the work is done less frequently.



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