
Drywall Installers, Ceiling Tile Installers, and Tapers

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Significant Points

- Most workers learn this 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 construction activity.

Nature of the Work

Drywall consists of a thin layer of gypsum between two layers of heavy paper. It is used to make walls and ceilings in most buildings today because it is 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 *framers* or *hangers*, fasten drywall panels to the inside framework of houses and other buildings. *Tapers* or *finishers*, prepare these panels for painting by taping and finishing joints and imperfections. In addition to drywall workers, ceiling tile installers and lathers also help to build walls and ceilings.

Because drywall panels are manufactured in standard sizes—usually 4 feet by 8 or 12 feet—drywall installers must measure, cut, fit, and fasten them to the inside framework of buildings. Workers cut smaller pieces to go around doors and windows. Installers saw, drill, 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, called studs. Because drywall is heavy and cumbersome, another worker usually helps the installer to position and secure the panel. Installers often use a lift when placing ceiling panels.

After the drywall is installed, tapers fill joints between panels with a joint compound, also called spackle or “mud.” 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. Using increasingly wider trowels, tapers apply second and third coats of the compound, sanding the treated areas after each coat to make them as smooth as the rest of the wall surface. This results in a seamless and almost perfect surface. For hard to reach heights and ceilings, sanding poles are commonly used. 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.

Making walls out of plaster requires the work of lathers. *Lathers* apply the support base for plaster coatings, fireproofing, or acoustical materials. This support base, called lath, is put on walls, ceilings, ornamental frameworks, and partitions of buildings before plaster and other coatings are added. Lathers use handtools and portable power tools, to nail, screw, staple, or wire-tie the lath directly to the structural framework of a building. At one time, lath was made of wooden strips, but now, it is usually made of wire, metal mesh, or gypsum, also known as rockboard. Metal lath is used when the plaster on top of it will be exposed to weather or water or when a surface is curved or irregular and not suitable for drywall.

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

A 40-hour week is standard, but the workweeks often fluctuate depending on the workload. Workers who are paid hourly rates receive premium pay for overtime.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Drywall installers, ceiling tile installers, and tapers learn their trade through formal and informal training programs. It can take 3 to 4 years of both classroom and paid on-the-job training to become a fully skilled worker, but many skills can be learned within the first year. In general, the more formal the training



Most beginners learn this trade on the job by helping experienced workers.

Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-16	
				Number	Percent
Drywall installers, ceiling tile installers, and tapers	47-2080	240,000	258,000	17,000	7
Drywall and ceiling tile installers	47-2081	186,000	199,000	14,000	7
Tapers	47-2082	54,000	58,000	3,900	7

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

process, the more skilled the individual becomes, and the more in demand by employers.

Education and training. Training for this profession can begin in a high school, where classes in English, math, mechanical drawing, blueprint reading, and general shop are recommended. The most common way to get a first job is to find an employer who will provide on-the-job training. Entry-level workers generally start as helpers, assisting more experienced workers. Employers may also send new employees to a trade or vocational school or community college to receive 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—at least 144 hours of instruction each year. The length of the apprenticeship 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 this way.

Helpers and apprentices 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.

Other jobseekers may choose to obtain their classroom training before seeking a job. There are a number of vocational-technical schools and training academies affiliated with the unions and contractors that offer training in these occupations. Employers often look favorably upon graduates of these training programs and usually start them at a higher level than those without the training.

Other qualifications. 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 basic arithmetic problems quickly and accurately also is required. In addition, a good work history or military service is viewed favorably by contractors.

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.

Apprentices usually must be at least 18 years old and have a high school diploma or GED. Those who complete apprenticeships registered with the Federal or State Government receive a journey worker certificate, recognized Nationwide.

Advancement. 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 because Spanish-speaking workers make up a large part of the construction workforce in many areas. Knowing English well also makes it easier to advance.

Employment

Drywall installers, ceiling tile installers, and tapers held about 240,000 jobs in 2006. Most worked for contractors specializing in drywall and ceiling tile installation; others worked for contractors doing many kinds of construction. About 56,000 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

Employment is expected to increase about as fast as the average for all occupations, largely reflecting overall growth of the construction industry. Good job prospects are expected overall.

Employment change. Employment is expected to grow by 7 percent between 2006 and 2016, about as fast as the average for all occupations. Growth reflects the number of new construction and remodeling projects. New residential construction projects are expected to provide the majority of new jobs during the projection decade, but home improvement and renovation projects are also expected to create jobs because existing residential and nonresidential buildings are getting old and need repair.

Job prospects. 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.

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.

Despite the growing use of exterior panels, most drywall installation and finishing is done indoors. Therefore, drywall workers lose less work time because of inclement weather than do some other construction workers. Nevertheless, like many other construction workers, employment is sensitive to the fluctuations of the economy. Workers in these trades may experience periods of unemployment when the overall level of construction falls. On the other hand, shortages of these workers may occur in some areas during peak periods of building activity.

Earnings

In May 2006, the median hourly earnings of wage and salary drywall and ceiling tile installers were \$17.38. The middle 50 percent earned between \$13.60 and \$22.58. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$10.90, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$28.85. The median hourly earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of drywall and ceiling tile installers were as follows:

Foundation, structure, and building exterior contractors	\$18.10
Drywall and insulation contractors	17.42
Nonresidential building construction	17.26
Residential building construction.....	17.26

In May 2006, the median hourly earnings of wage and salary tapers were \$19.85. The middle 50 percent earned between \$14.65 and \$25.70. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$11.59, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$31.23.

Some contractors pay these workers according to the number of panels they install or finish per day; others pay an hourly rate.

Trainees usually start at about half the rate paid to experienced workers and receive wage increases as they became more 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. You can also find information on the registered apprenticeship system with links to State apprenticeship programs on the U.S. Department of Labor’s Web site: http://www.doleta.gov/atels_bat Apprenticeship information is also available from the U.S. Department of Labor’s toll free helpline: (877) 872-5627.

For details about job qualifications and training programs in drywall 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
- Finishing Trades Institute, International Union of Painters and Allied Trades, 1750 New York Ave. NW., Washington, DC 20006. Internet: <http://www.finishingtradesinstitute.org>
- National Association of Home Builders, Home Builders Institute, 1201 15th St.NW., Washington, DC 20005. Internet: <http://www.hbi.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 St., Las Vegas, NV 89119. Internet: <http://www.carpenters.org>

For general information on apprenticeships and how to get them, see the *Occupational Outlook Quarterly* article “Apprenticeships: Career training, credentials—and a paycheck in your pocket,” online at <http://www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2002/summer/art01.pdf> and in print at many libraries and career centers.