



Armstrong's TrioGuard gives metal ceilings dirt-resistant performance.

Ceilings – consider the options and achieve the performance

Ceiling systems can often be one of the areas targeted during value-engineering exercises. **Paul Thompson** looks at how, with a little more attention early in the project, clients can get the performance they want without sacrificing aesthetics.

In a world where property owners and developers are looking to squeeze every last penny out of budgets, the fit-out sector – last in a scheme's chronological order – can repeatedly be left bearing the brunt of spiralling project costs.

Ceilings can be one big-ticket item that comes under the gaze of those carrying out 'value-engineering' exercises in a bid to pare down costs, often with varying degrees of success. But with a little more care in the planning and a more realistic approach taken in the earliest stages of a scheme, clients can still benefit from a ceiling package that provides the necessary acoustic performance and comes in on budget.

"Clients and designers need to engage with manufacturers early in the scheme so that we can fully support the project by getting the right product in the right areas," said Matthew Sexton, commercial sector market manager at British Gypsum.

"Although clients are aware of the importance of fire performance and sound insulation, for example, they don't always understand the importance of good acoustic performance or think about the

behaviour of sound within that space," Mr Sexton said.

The need for early consultation is paramount to ensure clients understand exactly what it is they want and that they get it. That is an opinion echoed by Rachel Sullivan, ceiling and partitioning category manager at distributor CCF.

"We often see projects where the ceiling has not been that well thought out. In many cases, it is about the budget and how far it stretches. Clients need to be educated about what the variety of products can achieve and where. By using a mix of soft fibre, mineral fibre or fleece covered tiles in different areas – even in the same office – acoustic performance can be controlled in different ways," she said.

Certain clients are very experienced in ceiling specification: they know exactly what they want and how best to deliver that. However, some pay little attention until the last minute and expect cost over-runs to be clawed back. It is at this point where knowing your specialist ceiling suppliers and contractors can really pay dividends.

"It is not just about substituting products; it is about designing

smarter," said John Spicer, technical sales manager at manufacturer Armstrong Ceilings. "We manufacture a very broad range of ceiling systems which can all work together. Most are based around the classic 600 x 600mm tile which everyone is familiar with. We want to make things as easy as possible for people."

Armstrong's ceiling systems include all materials and finishes and offer different properties for various performances, including sound absorption, light reflectance and recycled content.

In commercial office installations, the flexibility this offers can be hugely important to owners and occupiers. In a world where every additional £1 per sq. m means potential lost revenue, the desire to limit ceiling costs and yet still meet modern office aesthetic, performance and wellbeing requirements is evident. This can mean variations in ceiling specification is dependent on a variety of influences.

SAS International's group marketing manager, Matthew Mills, picks up this thread. He said: "In modern commercial offices, the quality of ceiling specification is tempered by realistic rental yields locally. Unsurprisingly, the highest specs tend to be from developments in extremely affluent and competitive city areas, or from owner-occupiers. Status, staff attraction and retention are the main commercial drivers here.

"Developers in major cities will have a range of requirements depending on who they are competing against. In major UK city developments, Grade A premium office space is traditionally all metal," Mr Mills added.

The onus on delivering savings while still meeting performance criteria remains down to the installation skill of the specialist contractor. Peter Nagle, contracts director at fit-out and office specialist BW, explained that to get real results, the ceilings shouldn't really be looked at in isolation but as part of a whole package, including wall and floor coverings, to make sure acoustic performance levels are sound across the space. Retrofitting ceilings once the building is fully occupied might help provide the ideal balance between lighting and acoustic performance.

Mr Nagle said: "It depends on each individual project. Acoustics are critical for some clients while others want better lighting. Even if the client gets acousticians involved, it isn't an exact science. You don't really know how a space will perform until all the plant, machinery, computers, workspaces and even workforce are installed.

"They will all have an impact on the final performance. Putting in a temporary solution with a view to coming back and assessing the space and retrofitting when it is fully operational could make sense," he concluded.



A black SAS200 mesh ceiling with clear PPC tiles fitted under each light. The metallic effect illuminates the tile and space below at the new Glasgow KPMG offices.