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BETTER PRODUCTION

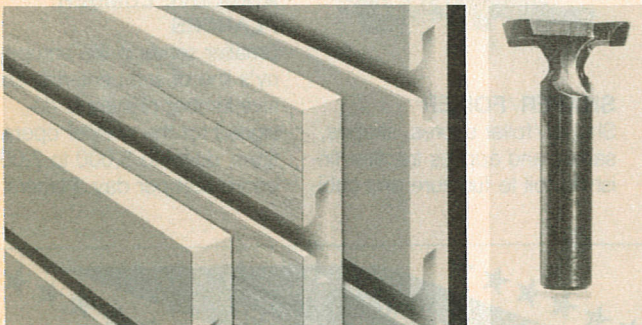
DIAMOND TOOLING CUTS DOWNTIME

By Betty Birner

Despite some apprehensions about diamond tooling, Aetna Plywood took a gamble. They bet on saving money—and the bet paid off.

Aetna Plywood, Inc. is a wholesale distributor of plywood, with three branches in the Midwest and corporate headquarters in Arlington Heights, Ill. For many years, Aetna has relied on Vincent Cabinet Service to produce fabricated parts for them. A few years ago, the companies began making and distributing slotwall store fixtures—MDF panels with T-slots routed across them at 3-in. intervals—used for merchandise displays.

"It's a big product," said George Markko, industrial products



Downtime was a problem in the production of slot-wall panels, left, until Aetna turned to diamond tools, right, which last longer than carbide.

sales development manager for Aetna. "We couldn't do this without someone like Vincent Cabinets unless we decided to get into manufacturing."

Aetna wanted to meet the rising demand for its slot-wall panels without reducing quality. The slot configuration is very demanding on tooling, especially in terms of the dimensional tolerances, Markko said.

"We had started out by slotting the board one slot at a time. Using carbide-tipped tools, the tools wore out pretty fast. If one cutter wears down, you have to stop the machine and remove it," he said. So the company had to estimate when the cutters would dull and remove them all at once, causing substantial downtime.

Aetna had heard about diamond tools being used successfully in Europe, and their search led them to Lach Diamond, Inc. They experimented with a number of cutters on a trial-and-error basis. The diamond cutters they use now were developed specifically for this operation, according to Harry Bielat, president of Vincent Cabinets. "It was a gamble," he said. There was no guarantee the savings would justify the cost.

The panels are sized on a panel saw and slotted on a Tyler 2400 router designed by Tyler and Vincent specifically for making slot-wall panels. With 21 router heads, the machine can rout up to 21 slots simultaneously in boards as large as 5 ft. by 8 ft.

"We were kind of nervous about getting involved in diamond tooling," Markko said. Running into a foreign object in the wood could ruin an expensive tool. But the advantages outweighed the risks, he said.

They began using the diamond tools about a year ago, and already "we have been able to reduce what we charge our customers considerably," Markko said. ■