

Backroom Efficiency: Maximize Your Mat Cutting Table

by Tim Dykstra, CPF

Custom framing is a wonderful business if you know how to sell great designs and have the ability to construct whatever you sell. But when all is designed and sold, the simple fact is you need the proper place to construct the work. Where you do this work is important; your production area should have good lighting and proper climate control. The worksurfaces you use are also one of the most important things to consider in this space. Take your matting tables, for instance. The better these worktables are designed to fit your stature (and other needs), the better and more efficient the work will be.



Utilizing your mat cutting table space wisely can save time and money.

Simply spend some time in your kitchen and you will see how important it is to have cabinets and countertops at the proper height to work comfortably. The same is true with matting tables. This is the table you will spend as much as eight or more hours a day working on or around. It is the foundation of most frame shops and needs to be constructed right to ensure that everything is done to make the job go easier.

Among the factors that need to be considered for this table, the first is height. For best results (and added ease on your back), it should be four inches shorter than your elbow when your arms are by your side. In other words, the measurement from the floor to four inches short of your elbow should be the actual tabletop height.

Obviously this measurement can result in different heights, which can be difficult to deal with when more than one person works at the same matting station. So someone may have to work at a little higher level and someone may have to work at a bit lower level. In extreme cases, where you have one person who is five foot tall and a colleague who is six-four, you will find the best solution may be to have simple platforms around the table. This allows both people to work comfortably.

Next, look at the other details of the worksurface.

Once you have done any mat cutting at all, you quickly realize how important it is to have the mat cutter completely stationary. This will give you total control as you cut intricate openings, and raise and lower the mat clamp over and over. You can stay focused on the job and not worry about the cutter moving.

Look at the design of the table in Figure 1. Each mat cutter is set into the top; yet it is free to be taken out or moved around. This is simple to set up and can offer you the versatility to switch from a 48" to a 60" mat cutter quickly. Each one has support where needed and can be reached easily from every end. You will quickly find out how nice this feature is when doing oversized multi-opening mats. You can move close to the action without having to go over the whole table to get there.

Sometimes you need more space to lay out oversized projects, or do additional fitting. With this table design, you can get extra space by removing the cutters and sitting in a leaf in their place. Just like your grandmother's kitchen table, you simply add a board to lengthen your work area where your cutter was. The fill-in board, or leaf, should be the same thickness as the tabletop itself and have a top covering of carpet to match the rest of the table for an even worksurface all across.

Mat cutter tables are traditionally the place where you do most of your cutting. The surface that you work on must accommodate just that. It must be firm enough to support the matting as you press the taped layers together and still be flexible enough to take the shock out of flipping mats, or an occasional fillet or frame. I recommend using inexpensive carpet as the worksurface top covering. This gives support without limiting flexibility. It also pads the sides of the table some, which minimizes a person's clothes getting caught on the edges of the table.

Whenever you have a tabletop worksurface, you will also have the problem of things like dirt, oil, or putty getting on it. Some simple precautions can be taken. I like to use old, or flawed, mats as the blotter worksurface. This gives me proper support, but also the ability to change it when things get soiled. If you wish, you can also use Kraft paper as the top cover; however, it can have a tendency to rip easily when stressed. With this set up, I keep the surface clean and still have the needed worktable support. Notice also in Figure 1 that the top of the mat cutter is flush with tabletop. This makes spinning around matting and setting it back into the cutter safer without any problems or worries of nicking a fragile bevel on an exposed edge.

Having enough room to spin and turn oversized matting as you cut can also be a challenge. The frequency of this task has increased for many framers, and our needs have grown with the size of the art people are purchasing. That is why the mat cutting table you see in

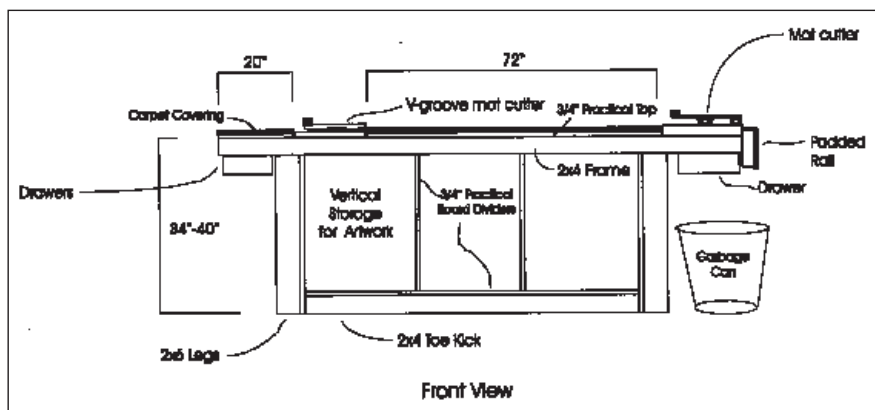


Figure 1: This table was constructed to maximize space and materials.

Figure 1 is made to accommodate 60" matting with enough room to lay out and spin these large boards easily. Simple planning can make the work go more quickly with consistent results.

Table height and size are definitely important things to consider when planning out a mat table in terms of lessening fatigue and creating a worksurface for efficiency. But there is still more that can be done to save steps and increase productivity as you work at your mat cutter.

The supplies you use each day around the cutter should be at arm's length. Mat blades, tape, ATG guns, pencils, and rulers are just a few of the things that we use each day. Installing homemade or commercial drawers under the table can be used to house these items. You can also use containers to hold tools like ATG guns alongside your work area. This not only keeps them handy but, more importantly, keeps your work area free of needless items. Look at how you do your projects and what steps you take each time a mat is cut. Then determine what supplies you use most. Keep these things closest to you and the extra supply in an accessible area nearby. You

can't keep everything you have under the table, but you can keep the prioritized items closest to you.

Storing things is an everyday part of life and so is the inevitable trash that is created with any project. I build in a place for the receptacles to go under the cutter tables. This way, I don't have to reach across or turn around to get rid of needless items. The garbage bin is also out of the way so you are not always tripping over it when walking around the table to answer the telephone or help a customer. Again, simple planning saves steps.

If you need more space for matting or, better yet, customer orders to be done, you will find the area directly under the matting table to be a great place to start. Use this space as vertical storage with a toe kick built in to eliminate any damage from feet, dust, or dirt. I built mine to accommodate folders that house the paper art projects that need to be done. This simple storage area is close to where they are first worked on. Matting or mounting is usually the first part of any project so a good place to keep them is near the matting tables. It can also serve as storage for partially completed

projects or a project that is waiting on materials to arrive

Saving time and creating efficiencies of production will end up making money in the long run. Time is one of the most expensive commodities in any frame shop, and anything that can be done to create a better flow will produce savings. The kind of work you do and the services you offer must also be taken into consideration. Are you a high-end design company that offers all the extras from collage framing to hand-wrapped fabric mats? Do you do special corner cuts or grooves?

Everything you can do to produce revenue is important to the growth and stability of your business. And when a certain service (a V-groove, for example) becomes a profit center, you have

to be prepared to do it efficiently. That is why you see two mat cutters on the matting table featured in this article. The cutter seen on the left in both Photo 1 and Figure 1 is set up to do only the reverse angle of the V-groove cut. With this added tool, I can cut out the opening where the V-groove would be on one cutter and then step over a few feet and place in the fall out and reverse cut it. There's no resetting a cutter every time and each cut is the right width. I have found over the years that framers may avoid selling this cut because it requires resetting the tool often, which slows production.

There are few tables in a frame shop that make more per hour than your mat cutting table does. So why not make it the most effi-

cient profit builder you have? Take the time to figure out what you can do to make your life easier and get the job done better. Analyze how you work, what type of work you consistently do, and the actual workflow of your shop. Make the changes that will help the most and start enjoying the benefits. ■

Tim Dykstra, CPF, has been in the business of framing for 20 years. Many years were spent as a retailer of a multi-location gallery and frame shop, specializing in high-end design and production. Tim has been an educator for PPFA and corporations that sell framing materials, from hand-carved mats to stacked mouldings. He has received 16 national and regional awards for design and craftsmanship.

