

Should You Own a Waterjet?

AS a follow-up to last month's article, we will discuss if you *should* buy a waterjet, and also discuss what it takes to make the waterjet useful and profitable to you, should you decide to buy one.

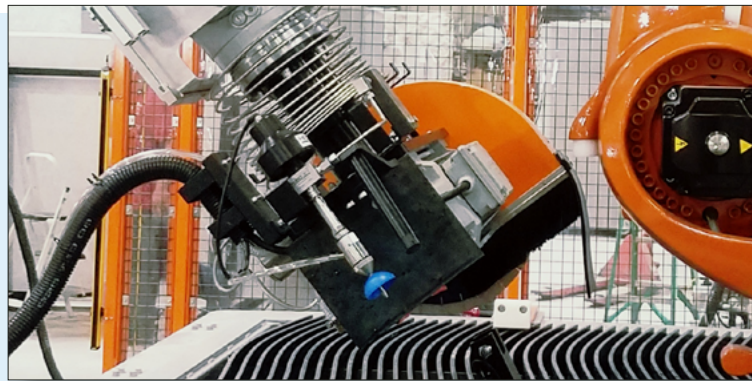
Why a Waterjet Should Possibly Be Your First Major Machine Purchase

If you started out like most shops, cutting, polishing and making all sink cutouts by hand and your volume is increasing, then a waterjet may be your best next step in the evolution of your shop. Some will argue that the first thing you should buy is a bridge saw and then a router, but many years of experience and observation says that a waterjet may be the best option if you have reached the limits of hand fabrication in your business.

If you think that buying a bridgesaw is the first priority, think again, because the most

Mark McMunn

difficult and onerous job in the shop is cutting sink cutouts. Also, it is in the layout and cutting of sink cutouts where the most costly mistakes are made. Either the sink is marked out in the wrong location, or the shop worker loses control of the handsaw and gouges out a groove in the edge of the sink cutout – or worse, runs up on the face of the slab with a handsaw, and makes the piece unusable. A bridgesaw will not protect you from any of these ever-present missteps while making cutouts, and it is the cutouts where your money is mostly made or lost. It may actually be better to continue to cut slabs by hand with something like an Accuglide system before you buy a bridgesaw, because the waterjet will go a very long way in eliminating mistakes in the sink cutout process. I can assure you that once



your fabricators see that they will never again have to do the back-breaking work of making large sink cutouts, shop morale will go way up.

You could say that a router would be a better choice at this point, because it not only cuts out the sink opening, but will polish it as well. That makes very good sense, but the problem here is that most routers are about double the cost, or more, of a basic waterjet, and that has been the case for almost 10 years. So, if you are an evolving shop, investing in a waterjet will greatly increase your productivity while taking on a monthly payment that is appropriate to your level of sales. Too many times, the purchase of a router has led to

the demise of many a good fab shop that took on too much of a monthly payment obligation too soon in the shop's evolution, and put the shop into a death spiral. I will say that after a few years of using a waterjet you will be primed to step up to a router, because you will then have digital manufacturing experience under your belt, and will easily make the transition to a router or multi-axes saw.

Let's say that after a few years with a waterjet you have increased productivity and sales to where you do in fact need more capacity. At that time, you could consider many options by purchasing a standard bridge saw and a router, or perhaps purchase a combination saw and waterjet.

You could possibly sell your existing waterjet to help finance the new equipment, or keep it as a backup. The point that needs to be made here is that after watching so many shops try different combinations of machines to make a rational and linear evolution from hand fabrication to fully digital, it appears that in reality, the first major purchase should be a waterjet, followed by a router and then a more fully automated bridgesaw.

Make that Waterjet (or Any Digital Piece of Equipment) Work For You

Just purchasing a machine like a waterjet, even if your volume more than justifies it, does not guarantee success with the machine. Often times, a shop that is ready to move up to digital equipment will buy the equipment, and then proceed to let it gather dust. How does this happen? The main culprit here is that before the machine is purchased it has not been decided who will run the machine.

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It is extremely important to understand that to make the machine give you the maximum return there must be at least one single person dedicated to learning how to operate the machine and to maintain it. Too many times the machine shows up, gets installed, a couple of days of training are completed, and then the boss fails to appoint someone to actually run the machine. That combined with impatience with regard to a reasonable learning curve often leads the boss to conclude that the machine is a great “disappointment,” or the machine did not “deliver” the promised production. These types of shops often revert to just doing things by hand and let a machine that would otherwise be minting money sit idly by, gathering dust, and accumulating piles of scrap stone leaning against it. Following that path, it will be just a matter of time before the shop will no longer be able to compete.

Here is what it takes. The moment it is decided a piece of equipment will be purchased, it should also be decided who will be the main operator. When that decision is made, arrange for that person to go and get training before the machine arrives. Also, it is imperative that the operator should learn which parts of the machine will require the most maintenance, which parts need to

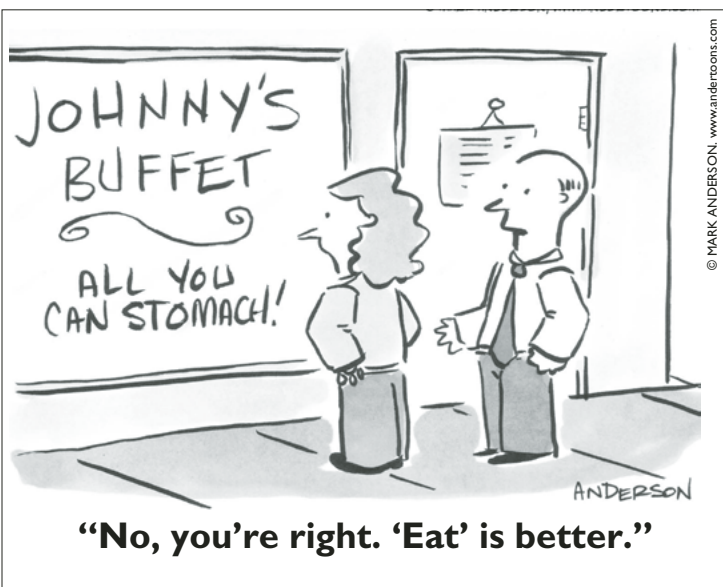


be replaced most often. To keep up with each new version of the software for the machine, get that information directly from the manufacturer. Those are just a few things that should be done prior to machine arrival. Post arrival, there should be a dedicated set of tools for that machine that are locked up in a cabinet so that they are readily available when the machine needs maintenance or repair. Finally, there should be a second person who is the assistant to the main operator, and may ultimately become an operator himself or herself. Always keep a person in training in the event the main operator should leave.

These suggestions are just opinions formed by many decades of observation in the stone industry. I hope that this discussion has at least provided a reason to give

you pause before jumping into the major financial commitment that comes with a machine purchase. It was also my objective to have you consider that there is a definite order of machine types to bring into your shop, and that it does matter. Also, although I did touch a little on the human element involved in the purchase, the human element if not addressed properly in regards to a proper level of pay for the responsibility of operating an important piece of production equipment can put you in the frustrating position of having your operators constantly hired away by competitors. Remember that the marketplace determines how much a job is worth, so keep yourself informed. I wish everyone continued success with your business no matter which machines you choose to use.

“Nothing is more wonderful than the art of being free, but nothing is harder to learn how to use than freedom.”
— Alexis de Tocqueville



American Black Granite: Unique and Versatile for Large-Scale Architectural Projects

IN Pennsylvania a little-known quarry is turning out a black granite with dramatic veining, and it's showing up in both living rooms and city parks.

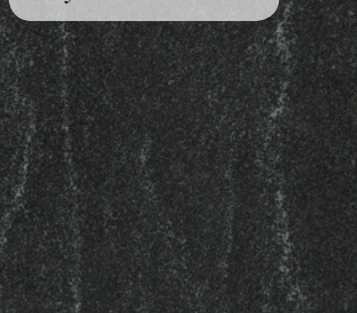
One of the challenges of large-scale architectural projects using natural materials is consistency of material over large lot sizes, and over long build times.

One natural stone that meets these demands is American Black granite which Polycor quarries in Pennsylvania. Because Polycor owns the quarry it has total control of supply, ensuring it can supply blocks of the same quality of color and veining, no matter how long the project takes.

American Black granite meets a wide range of designs thanks to the versatility that comes from two different cutting directions. One directional cut provides a consistent linear veining while the other yields a gentle, consistent, wavy movement.

“What really defines us is when an architect is looking for linear movement,” says Jeff Lemieux, vice president of international block sales at Polycor. “Other quarries can provide the swirly mist granites, but not the linear. When it's time to supply the linear

Steven Schrenk
Polycor



American Black Granite

cut. An American Black granite block cut in this way is called American Mist for the swirling spray pattern revealed within the stone.

What's the Difference Between Jet Mist and American Black Granites?

Don't be fooled by these look-alikes. American Black and Jet Mist quarries are not too far from each other but yield much different qualities of granite. This granite deposit runs like an underground river down through the mid-Atlantic states, with markedly different appearances throughout. If you were to map the appearance of the granite deposit on a color spectrum it might appear as a black to grey



American Black granite slab, linear cut with antique finish to bring out the distinctive white veining.

veining in large scale, we are the only one with the capacity to meet the demand.”

Those “swirly” mists Lemieux refers to is the product of slicing the granite blocks against the grain, also referred to as a fleuri

ombre from North to South. At Polycor's Elverson, Pennsylvania quarry the company pulls blocks of American Black granite, deep in black color with linear white veining.

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