

Build vs. Buy redux

Andrew Davis January, 2020

I wrote recently about build vs. buy. That column was about gizmos, fixtures, jigs and other such items. This time it's different (TTID) – much more serious. A month ago, round about end of November, I received multiple adverts for a Sojbergs Elite 2000 work bench (275 pounds). The exact same deal was offered by at least four different vendors: buy the \$2300 work bench and get a free cabinet worth between \$500 and \$900 depending on how clever your accountant was (taxes and shipping were extra and not insignificant). The deal expires on 1/1/2020 – 3 days after this column is being written.

My fascination with work benches goes way back; I've even purchased a few books on benches and have read at least 47 articles on how to build your own Roubo, shaker, antique, torsion box, 21st century, European, Christopher Schwartz, new age, low-cost, or portable work bench. When I first got into woodworking, even before I joined EMGW, I thought my very first project would be to build a bench. That never happened – a good thing too - since at the time I did not know the difference between a hand plane and a chisel, and had never heard of a jointer, planer, or biscuit machine. As fate would have it, I happened to see a small Sojbergs bench (54 inches long) equipped with two vises on sale at Woodcraft and fell for the sales pitch. Little did I know that a bench weighing a meager 66 pounds provides a poor platform for hand work.

The Sojberg's Elite 2000 at 74 inches long - is about 17 inches longer and 50 pounds heavier than the Sojbergs Elite 1500, which is the bench used in the Woodcraft Walpole classroom. The smaller bench would be a better fit for the space in my workshop, but the smaller bench is not on sale and in fact, for the time being at least, costs significantly more than the larger bench with cabinet. The situation defies my sense of order in the cosmos. And \$2350 plus shipping and taxes blows my budget unless I can convince myself and argue with my wife that owning such a workbench will change my life.

I asked a few guild members about their philosophy on benches. Here is what I heard.

- a. Why spend precious time building any tool or usufruct when you can buy it ready-made and spend your time making furniture? Of course, if you are a professional, the purchase cost would be tax deductible – not an issue for me, a rank novice or hobbyist as I'd rather describe myself.
- b. The Sojbergs workbenches are nice, but very overpriced, even when on sale. (The other store-bought workbenches are either too big, too lightweight, or have design features I don't need or want.)
- c. Take a look at the 21st century workbench, the subject of online articles complete with detailed plans. For about \$500 in lumber and another \$450 in vices and parts and a few weeks (or month) of your time you can build a great workbench. (Thanks to Mike Zwolenski). Add to your skill level at the same time and hope that whatever mistakes you make during construction won't blow the budget or project schedule.
- d. Don't go all-build or all-buy – take a hybrid approach (thank you Jim Tartaglia) – buy a top from an industrial butcher block source and build the legs/stretcher sub-structure yourself. Add your own bench dog holes and vices as needed. Keep it simple. Do you really need the storage cabinet underneath?
- e. Think carefully about how you are going to use the bench and design in (or buy) only the features and functions you need, no more than that.

As has been the case in the past, whenever I get the urge to buy a nice workbench, I eventually lie down until the urge passes. And so it goes. Yes, I think I'm going to take a stab at the 21st century workbench, just as soon as I finish the projects currently on my list. It will be a learning experience. Or maybe the Elite 1500 will go on sale and I can start the argument all over again.