

Material Delivery System For Clean Room Environments

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

Not applicable.

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STATEMENTS REGARDING FEDERALLY SPONSORED
RESEARCH OR DEVELOPMENT

Not applicable.

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FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention generally relates to the field of clean room-like environments and, more particularly, to a material delivery system for such environments.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

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Many manufacturing or assembly processes require an environment which is free of particulates or other contaminants to at least a certain degree. Clean rooms have long been used in the semiconductor industry for the processing of wafers from which semiconductor devices are formed. Other industries which have used clean rooms include computer disk drive manufacturers. Certain disk drive parts are manufactured in a clean room environment, while other parts are manufactured and then cleaned prior to entry into a clean room for incorporation into some type of an assembly within the clean room (e.g., an actuator arm assembly).

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One alternative to clean rooms which has been used at least in the computer disk drive industry is a so-called minienvironment. Minienvironments effectively are a self-contained unit which may be disposed within or outside of a clean room and which provide clean room-like air qualities. A representative example of a minienvironment is disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 5,487,768 to Zytka et al., which is owned by the assignee of this patent application, and which is incorporated by reference in its entirety herein. Generally, a minienvironment is an enclosure of sorts which has its own forced air system for delivering filtered air into the noted enclosure. Various types of access may be provided to the minienvironment and through which this air may be discharged along with any particulates or other contaminants contained therein. These accesses or fluid

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interconnections with the surrounding environment are typically disposed on a lower portion of the minienvironment, and the filtered air is typically introduced into the minienvironment in an upper portion thereof.

Smaller-sized openings may be provided in the minienvironment's enclosure to allow an operator to dispose his or her arms therethrough to retrieve parts and/or to execute some type of operation (e.g., assembly) within the minienvironment. Only the operator's hands and possibly a portion of the operator's arms need to meet certain cleanliness requirements with this type of minienvironment. It should be appreciated that these types of minienvironments thereby do not provide for total isolation from the surrounding environment, but instead rely on a higher air pressure within the minienvironment's enclosure to keep particulates and other contaminants which may exist in the surrounding environment from flowing into the minienvironment through the noted fluid interconnections. The above-noted reference to an "enclosure" for a minienvironment would thereby include a shroud, hood, or the like which does not provide for a total enclosure (e.g., a gap may exist along a lower portion of a sidewall of the minienvironment). Some minienvironments may include a glove box or the like to further maintain the cleanliness within the minienvironment and for the above-noted types of purposes. Still other minienvironments have no access for operations personnel during normal operations within the minienvironment, but instead rely on robotic devices within the minienvironment to perform the desired operation(s) therewithin. In both of these later instances, there may be a total isolation of the interior of the minienvironment from the surrounding environment.

There are rather significant costs associated with the operation of both clean rooms and minienvironments. Simply put, the various actions which are undertaken in order to maintain the desired level of cleanliness often come at a rather significant financial cost. Both personnel and all other materials (e.g., parts to be used in an assembly being executed in the clean room/minienvironment) which enter the clean room or the minienvironment must be within the desired cleanliness level. U.S. Patent Nos. 5,713,791 and 5,344,365 both address rather extravagant systems/methods directed to the transfer of materials to/from/within a clean room environment. So-called "clean carts" have also been used to transfer materials from outside a clean room to a location therein.

Known clean carts are simplistically a box with an access door on a side thereof (i.e., the top is non-removable in these units). Cleaned parts are loaded into this "box" through the access door. Filtered air is simultaneously blown into the "box" during loading through this access door as well. All intended discharges from within the "box" at this time are also through this same access door as there are no other designed perforations in the clean cart. Once the clean cart is loaded, the door is closed to seal the interior of the same and it may then be wheeled into the clean room. Typically these clean carts are parked next to a station which uses the parts contained therein in some manner.

Numerous disadvantages exist in relation to known clean carts. One is that these clean carts consume floor space which in some cases may be at a premium. Another is that the operator must manually retrieve parts from the clean cart and provide the same to the subject workstation. Often this involves certain repetitive motions which may subject the operator to injury over time. For instance, an operator positioned on a chair at a minienvironment may have to rotate 90° and bend over to access the parts contained within the clean cart, and thereafter rotate back to the minienvironment with the parts in hand (typically on a tray) to position them into the minienvironment. The alternative would be for the operator to get up and walk over to the clean cart which not only wastes valuable time, but possibly means positioning the clean cart at a location where there may be unanticipated impacts between the clean cart and personnel which would be undesirable in a number of respects.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention generally relates to material delivery systems and, more particularly, to material delivery systems for use in clean room-like environments which include a station. "Stations" for purposes of the present invention include any zone or area where products are stored, assembled, subject to transport, or acted upon by any type of processing apparatus and/or operations personnel. "Clean room-like environments" include clean rooms as well as minienvironments of the type discussed above.

A first aspect of the present invention relates to a material delivery system which may exist as a stand-alone unit (e.g., a portable cart, an enclosure of sorts with wheels, casters, or other transport mechanism) or which may be incorporated into the design of

a given station (e.g., by being fixedly interconnected with at least a portion of the station such as a work table or the like). The material delivery system includes at least some type of enclosure which may be defined at least in part by a sidewall assembly. In one embodiment the vertical extent or height of this enclosure is such that it may be disposed
5 "under" stations of the above-noted type. Positioning the enclosure of the material delivery system of the first aspect of the present invention in this manner reduces the space requirements in the work area at issue by taking advantage of space which is typically wasted in the above-noted types of environments and which is often thought of as being "dirty." Products (including component parts) used at the station may be stored
10 within the confines of the enclosure. In another embodiment of this first aspect of the present invention, the material delivery system includes an elevator which is disposed at least somewhere within the confines of the enclosure for moving a payload therewithin. Preferably, both of these embodiment are used in combination although such is not required. In the case of the noted combination, a payload may be stored in each of a
15 plurality of trays which are stacked within the confines of the enclosure and raised by the elevator to a suitable height for access by equipment, operations personnel, or both at the station.

Various refinements exist of the features noted above in relation to the first aspect of the present invention. Further features may also be incorporated in the present
20 invention as well. These refinements and additional features may exist individually or in any combination. The station with which the material delivery system of the present invention is at least interfaceable therewith may include a table top or the like on which one or more processing/assembly operations are performed. One or more apertures may extend through this table in alignment with the elevator such that product may be brought
25 up through this aperture(s) to an upper surface associated with the table, all by an upward movement of the elevator through the enclosure. Materials present at any one of these apertures through the table may be characterized as being within a material handling zone or the like. Other areas may exist at the station as well, including one or more work areas. Materials provided to the station by the material delivery system may be
30 transported either manually or via robotics to one or more areas throughout the station. In the case of a minienvironment, materials may be provided by the upward movement

of the elevator to one or more material handling zones (e.g., by having a plurality of separate trays disposed at a common level on the elevator, by using a partitioned tray) and the minienvironment may include one or more workstations or the like.

5 The elevator may include a vertically movable platform within the enclosure which functions as a support surface or the like for the elevator. One or more trays may be positioned on this platform in stacked relation, in side-by-side relation, or both, with each tray typically including a plurality of parts. Both partitioned (e.g., for segregating parts within a given tray) and non-partitioned trays (e.g., for containing a plurality of the same parts) are contemplated. The area within the enclosure in which products may be
10 stored on the platform may be characterized as a material storage space within the enclosure. Although the elevator could be configured to remove an empty tray from a certain position and replace the same with a tray having more of the desired parts (e.g., a continuous loop conveyor-like system), as will be discussed in more detail below, in one embodiment the drive assembly for the elevator of the material delivery system may
15 include a simple lead screw-based drive assembly which includes one or more rotatably driven lead screws. In this case it may be necessary to manually remove the empty trays from the material delivery system at the station. These empty trays may be provided to a material disposal area or the like, such that trays may be characterized as being disposable.

20 Movement of the platform within the enclosure may be characterized as being between a lowermost and an uppermost position, with the lowermost position being disposed at least about 24 inches (60.96 centimeters) below that area where it is desired to provide the materials. With some of the materials being disposed at this elevation below the station, this emphasizes the desirability of including an elevator within the
25 material delivery system to alleviate the need for the operator to reach down into the enclosure to retrieve product. An infinite number of positions of the elevator relative to the enclosure may be realized to tailor the material delivery system to the needs of a particular station or to a particular operator. One way to affect this movement is to have a drive assembly controller for a drive assembly (e.g., motor) used by the elevator. This
30 drive assembly controller may be operated by operations personnel to dispose the elevator at the desired height, and thereby the product provided thereby. Simplification of one or

more aspects of the material delivery system may be realized by actually maintaining the drive assembly controller at the station. As such and particularly in the case of a portable material delivery system, once the material delivery system is positioned relative to the station, all that need be done is to interconnect the drive assembly controller and the drive assembly by a communications cable or the like (e.g., plug the communications cable into the appropriate location on the material delivery system, such that the material delivery system need not include any significant electronics).

The elevator platform may also be viewed as defining an upper chamber and a lower chamber within the enclosure, with the upper chamber being available for product storage and subsequent transport by the elevator. These upper and lower chambers need not, and preferably are not, isolated from each other at all times, particularly for the case when the material delivery system is used with a minienvironment. Minienvironments typically use a forced air system which directs filtered air into the minienvironment from a location above the work surface area to direct particulates and other contaminants away from the work surface area and preferably out of the minienvironment. Preferably the material delivery system does not affect the air flows provided by this forced air system, and thereby does not significantly affect the cleanliness levels within the minienvironment. In this regard, a space may be provided about at least a portion of the perimeter of the platform to fluidly interconnect the above-noted upper and lower chambers of the enclosure. Preferably an annular spaces exist between the perimeter of the platform. Other ways of fluidly interconnecting the defined upper and lower chambers may be used, although the space about at least a portion of the platform's perimeter is currently preferred. Flows from the minienvironment which enter the upper chamber and "flow" over the product therein may also flow down into the lower chamber of the enclosure.

Allowing flow from the noted upper chamber to the noted lower chamber within the enclosure reduces the effects of the material delivery system on the cleanliness of the minienvironment. Additional features may be incorporated to further reduce the potential for a disruption of the minienvironment by the presence of the material delivery system in accordance with principles of the present invention. In this regard, the enclosure of the material delivery system may include a bottom such that the lower chamber is disposed

at least somewhere between the bottom and the elevator's platform. A plurality of perforations may be included in this bottom structure. Pressurized fluid which enters the lower chamber may then be discharged from the enclosure through these plurality of perforations. This further reduces the potential for the material delivery system of the present invention adversely affecting the air quality of the minienvironment.

In at least certain instances it will be desirable to isolate the product within the upper chamber from the environment in which the enclosure of the material delivery system of the present invention is disposed. In the case where the above-noted perforations are incorporated on a bottom of the enclosure, stated another way preferably there is a way to seal these perforations off from the upper chamber. Consider the case where the material delivery system is a portable cart or the like for providing product to a minienvironment. In this regard, "clean" product likely will be loaded into the upper chamber of the enclosure at a location which is outside of the area in which the minienvironment is located. Attempts will typically be made to maintain the level of cleanliness of these "clean" products during this loading procedure as well. A number of features may be incorporated into the material delivery system of the present invention to attempt to maintain this level of cleanliness during the transport of the material delivery system of the present invention to the minienvironment. One such feature is incorporating a gasket on the above-noted bottom of the enclosure. This gasket may be configured to totally surround the area of the bottom having the above-noted plurality of perforations. An extension then may be interconnected with the platform of the elevator to sealingly engage with this gasket about its entire circumference. Typically, this will be the case only when the elevator is disposed in its lowermost position (e.g., when the enclosure is "full" of product). After the material delivery system is "parked" at the minienvironment, the platform may be raised to provide product in the above-noted manner. This movement of the platform may then disengage the extension from the gasket to allow air flow from the minienvironment to flow into the upper chamber, into the lower chamber, and then out of the enclosure through the now "un-sealed" plurality of perforations.

Another feature which may be included in the material delivery system and which is applicable to maintaining at least a certain level of cleanliness within the enclosure, for

instance during transport of the material delivery system, is an access to an interior of the enclosure which contains product. In this regard, the enclosure may include an opening through which product may be loaded into the enclosure. This opening may be sealed by a cover or top which is removable from an uppermost portion of the enclosure in at least some respect. Both a total removal and a partial removal of this top (e.g., using a hinge to allow the top to pivot away from the enclosure) are contemplated. The top may interface with one or more flanges or the like formed on the enclosure to enhance the seal between the enclosure and the top. One or more gaskets may be included in the interface between the top and the enclosure to further enhance the seal therebetween. Compression of the top against the enclosure may also be used to enhance the seal therebetween. Any combination of these cover-to-enclosure sealing features may be used as well.

Preferably the area of the enclosure in which product is stored is at least substantially isolated from the remainder of the material delivery system of the present invention. An additional feature which relates to this issue is how the elevator's platform interconnects with the remainder of the elevator and which is subject to a number of characterizations. Broadly stated, the mechanical interconnection(s) of the platform with the remainder of the elevator is disposed at an elevation which is below that of an uppermost surface of the platform. In one embodiment, at least one and preferably one or more of guide rods, lead screws, or both, are used to advance the platform vertically within the enclosure. The area within the enclosure through which the platform travels may be at least substantially isolated from these guide rods/lead screws. For instance, one or more vertically extending partitions may be disposed inwardly and spaced from an adjacent portion of the enclosure so as to be disposed between the platform and each guide rod/lead screw. That is, the guide rods/lead screws may be disposed within this space or spaces between a periphery of the platform and the inner surface of the enclosure. Consider an example where the platform is at least substantially rectangular or square. One guide rod, one lead screw, or both may be disposed on one side of the platform, and one guide rod, one lead screw, or both may be disposed on an opposite side of the platform. One partition may be disposed between the platform and guide rod(s) and/or lead screw(s) on one of the noted sides of the platform to provide the desired degree of isolation, and another partition may be disposed between the platform and

guide rod(s)/lead screw(s) on the other of the noted platform sides. The structure (e.g., a coupling, bracket, connecting rod, or the like) which connects the platform with a particular guide rod or lead screw may extend through a split seal (e.g., a pliable material with a slit therethrough) formed in the subject partition. In cases where the guide
5 rod(s)/lead screw(s) are vertically disposed, so to will be the corresponding split seal(s).

The elevator includes a drive system of at least some type to advance the platform within the enclosure. One appropriate type of drive system uses the above-noted lead screw(s). In this regard, a motor may be disposed within the enclosure somewhere below the partition. At least some degree of isolation is thereby provided between the motor
10 and the product which is on/stacked upon the platform (e.g., this further reduces the potential for the existence of the motor "contaminating" such product). Further reductions in the potential for the drive system "contaminating" the product on the platform may be realized by establishing the interconnection between this motor and the lead screw(s) somewhere outside of the enclosure. In this regard, the motor's shaft may
15 extend through a bottom of the enclosure, as may each lead screw used by the drive assembly. One or more pulleys may be fixed to that portion of the motor's drive shaft which extends through and beyond the enclosure. A drive transfer member such as a continuous loop of rubber, chain, or the like may then be looped around the motor pulley and the corresponding lead screw (which may also include a pulley) to interconnect the
20 rotating drive shaft of the motor with each lead screw. Rotation of the lead screw(s) then raises or lowers the platform which will somehow be threadably interconnected with the lead screw (either directly or indirectly). Stability of the platform during travel within the enclosure is provided by disposing rotatably-driven lead screws on diagonally opposite corners of the platform and disposing guide rods on diagonally opposite corners of the
25 platform such that there is a single guide rod or lead screw effectively at each corner of the platform. Rotation of the lead screw(s) "drives" the platform or moves the same within the enclosure, while there is a sliding interrelation between the platform and guide rod(s).

A second aspect of the present invention relates to an improved clean cart of sorts
30 which may be used in a filtered environment, such as a clean room, minienvironment, or the like, and such may be used in combination with those features discussed above in

relation to the first aspect of the present invention. The clean cart includes a body and a cover which is removable therefrom through a cover lifting assembly. An enclosed material storage area is defined at least in part by the body and the cover. Since the clean cart is for filtered environments, the material storage area is sufficiently sealed to maintain contamination levels at least as clean as a Class 100 environment in accordance with Federal Standard 209.

Various refinements exist of the features noted above in relation to the second aspect of the present invention. Further features may also be incorporated in the second aspect of the present invention as well. These refinements and additional features may exist individually or in any combination. How the cover lifting assembly may act on the cover to remove the same from the body is subject to a number of characterizations. The cover lifting assembly may act on the cover so as to move the cover away from the body along a substantially axial or linear path (e.g., "straight" away from the body). This reduces the potential for degradation of any gasket which may be attached to the cover to provide a more suitable seal between the cover and the body of the cart since the gasket will not be exposed to any shear-like forces when removed in this manner. The cover lifting assembly may also be characterized as pushing upwardly on the cover to displace the same from the body.

The body in the subject second aspect may include at least one cover support surface, and this cover support surface may include at least one aperture which extends entirely therethrough. Preferably there is at least a pair of such cover support surfaces which are disposed on opposite sides of the body. Wheels may be provided on the lower surface of the cover to assist in removal of the cover from the body. When the cover is seated onto the body via the cover support surface(s), each of these wheels may be disposed within and extend completely downwardly through one of the apertures which is aligned therewith. These wheels may be acted upon to push the cover away from the body for purposes of cover removal, and therefore may be considered as part of the cover lifting assembly. Another function may be provided by these wheels. Once the wheels are disposed in at least substantially co-planar relation with their corresponding cover support surface, the cover may be rolled off of the body of the cart. In a case where a gasket is attached to the lower surface of the cover to provide a desired seal between

the cover and the body, having these wheels extend further away from the lower surface of the cover than the gasket will then displace the gasket from the cover support surface during this rolling motion. As such, the gasket will not be exposed to any shearing-like forces which will thereby prolong the life of the gasket.

5 The above-noted aperture(s) in the cover support surface(s) may be utilized to lock the cover onto the body, alone or in combination with the above-noted cover "lifting" function. In this regard, the cover may include at least one first latch member which extends downwardly through an aperture in the cover support surface aligned therewith. A second latch member may be interconnected with the body and further may
10 be engageable with its corresponding first latch member so as to "lock" the cover onto the body, or to restrict relative movement between the cover and body in at least one direction. Preferably, the noted aperture(s) in the cover support surface(s) is used to both "lock" the cover to the body, and further to lift the cover away from the body. In this regard, a first latching and camming assembly may be interconnected with the cover and
15 extend downwardly into and preferably through an aligned aperture in the cover support surface. A second latching and camming assembly may be movably interconnected with the body of the cart. In a first position, the second latching and camming assembly engages its corresponding first latching and camming assembly so as to "lock" the cover onto the body in the above-described manner. Movement of the second latching and
20 camming assembly from its first position at least toward its second position first "unlocks" the cover from the body, and thereafter directs the first latching and camming member upwardly through its corresponding aperture to displace the cover from the body and to allow for removal of the same. In one embodiment, the second latching and camming assembly is directed upwardly within its corresponding aperture to not only
25 direct its corresponding first latching and camming assembly in the above-described manner, but to further provide a surface which is at least substantially co-planar with the adjoining cover support surface. This is particularly desirable where the first latching and camming assembly includes a roller for rolling the cover off the body.

30 More than one first latching and camming assembly and more than one second latching and camming assembly may be provided for each cover support surface. For instance and in the case where there are two such cover support surfaces disposed on

opposite sides of the body of the cart, two displaced first latching and camming assemblies may be provided on the cover on one side thereof, while two displaced first latching and camming assemblies may be provided on the opposite side of the cover. Similarly, two second latching and camming assemblies may be disposed on one side of the body of the cart, and two second latching and camming assemblies may be disposed on the opposite side of the body of the cart. An appropriate linkage may interconnect the second latching and camming assemblies which are located on the same side of the body of the cart. Both of these linkages in turn may be activated by interconnecting these linkages with a common handle which may be pivoted in one direction to seal the cover onto the body, and which may be pivoted in the opposite direction to lift the cover from the body in the above-described manner. The handle may also be used to transport the cart from one locale to another, such as by incorporating wheels on the bottom of the cart.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SEVERAL VIEWS OF THE DRAWING

Figure 1 is a perspective view of one embodiment of a material delivery system.

Figure 2 is exploded, perspective view of the material delivery system of Figure 1.

Figure 3A is a perspective view of a lower open end of a body of the material delivery system of Figure 1.

Figure 3B is another perspective view of the lower open end of the body of the material delivery system of Figure 1.

Figure 3C is a top view of the body of the material delivery system of Figure 1 with a portion of a gasket interface section disposed on an upper portion thereof being removed.

Figure 4 is an exploded, perspective view of a material delivery elevator for the material delivery system of Figure 1.

Figure 5 is an exploded, perspective view of a lower surface of a bottom attached to the body of the material delivery system of Figure 1, as well as other components of the material delivery elevator located thereat.

Figure 6A is an exploded, enlarged perspective view of a guide rod assembly from the material delivery elevator of Figure 4.

Figure 6B is an exploded, enlarged perspective view of components of the guide rod assembly of Figure 6A.

5 Figure 7 is an exploded, enlarged perspective view of a drive screw rod assembly from the material delivery elevator of Figure 4.

Figure 8 is a schematic of a drive assembly controller for the material delivery elevator of Figure 4.

10 Figure 9 is a cutaway view of the material delivery system of Figure 1 to show a material storage area with a stack of trays with parts loaded therein.

Figure 10A is a perspective view of an upper surface of a top or cover for the material delivery system of Figure 1.

Figure 10B is a perspective view of a lower surface of the cover presented in Figure 10A.

15 Figure 10C is an exploded, perspective view of the cover presented in Figure 10A.

Figure 10D is an exploded, perspective view of a portion of a first cover latch/lift subassembly of a cover latch/lift assembly which both latches and lifts the cover of Figure 10A onto/from the body of the material delivery system of Figure 1.

20 Figure 11A is a side view of the material delivery system of Figure 1 which illustrates in more detail the cover latch/lift assembly.

Figure 11B is enlarged, side view of the cover latch/lift assembly presented in Figure 11A.

Figure 11C is an exploded, enlarged perspective view of the pair of latch/lift assembly linkages used by the cover latch/lift assembly of Figure 11A.

25 Figure 11D is an exploded, enlarged perspective view of a second latch/lift subassembly of the cover latch/lift assembly which is interconnected with the linkages presented in Figure 11C and further which interfaces with the first latch/lift subassembly presented in Figure 10D to provide the latching and lifting functions for the cover.

30 Figure 12 is one embodiment of a work station which uses an embodiment of a material delivery system.

Figure 13 is another embodiment of a work station which uses an embodiment of a material delivery system.

Figure 14 is one embodiment of a minienvironment with which any of the above-noted material delivery systems may be used.

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DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The present invention will now be described in relation to the accompanying drawings which at least assist in illustrating its various pertinent features. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate a material delivery system 2 which provides a number of desirable functions.

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One function of the material delivery system 2 is to provide an at least substantially sealed environment in which parts, components, or the like may be stored. This renders the material delivery system 2 particularly useful for transporting such parts to filtered environments such as a clean room or minienvironment. Portability is also provided by the material delivery system 2 of Figures 1-2 which allows the same to be loaded with parts in one locale (e.g., outside of a clean room, outside of a room which contains one or more minienvironments) for subsequent transport to another locale (e.g., within a clean room, within a room which contains one or more minienvironments). Delivery of its payload to a desired elevation is also made available by the material delivery system 2 for access by an operator or transport/assembly/processing apparatus.

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The material delivery system 2 of Figures 1-2 is in the form of a clean cart 6 of sorts having a plurality of wheels 46 to provide the noted portability feature. The cart 6 further generally includes a body 10, a top or cover 50, and a bottom 34 which are appropriately interconnected and collectively define an enclosed space 26, at least part of which may be used for the storage of parts or any other desired payload. Access to this material storage space 26 is provided by having the cover 50 being detachably interconnected with the body 10. Parts or any other payload for that matter may be loaded into the enclosed space 26 and onto a material delivery elevator 100 disposed therein after removal of the cover 50. Once loaded, the cover 50 may be installed on the body 10 and preferably sealed thereto, for instance to maintain any cleanliness standards associated with parts loaded therein. Thereafter the material delivery system 2 may be readily transported to the desired locale via the rolling action provided by the wheels 46.

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Parts stored in the material delivery system 2 may then be made available to an operator, relevant equipment (e.g., any device used in the manufacture of disk drives), or both by removing the cover 50 from the body 10. Activation of the material delivery elevator 100 may then be affected to dispose the parts at a desired elevation for access by an operator and/or any appropriate equipment.

Figures 1-3C illustrate various features of the body 10 of the cart 6. Initially, the body 6 is defined by a sidewall assembly 14 which is disposed entirely or circumferentially about a reference point or axis to provide a continuous perimeter for the body 10. An upper portion of the body 10 includes an upper open end 12. The sidewall assembly 14 in the illustrated embodiment is defined by four panels 16 which are appropriately interconnected. Attached to a pair of opposing panels 16 at an upper portion thereof (via a plurality of fasteners 21) are a pair of cover support surfaces 19 which interface with the cover 50 when disposed thereon and which further facilitate removal of the cover 50 from the body 10. A pair of apertures 20 are provided on each cover support surface 19 for latching the cover 50 onto the body 10, preferably in sealing relation. Also appropriately attached to the body 10 in proximity to its upper open end 12 is a gasket interface section 92 which provides the primary sealing surface between the removable cover 50 and the body 10. Further details on these features relating to the cover will be discussed in more detail below.

Disposed within the body 10 are four partitions 18 which are appropriately interconnected. Partitions 18a and 18c are separated from their corresponding panel 16 by one or more spacers 32 (Figure 2) which extend along at least substantially the entire height of the body 10 in at least substantially vertical relation. In the assembled condition the spacers 32 do not extend beyond the upper open end 12 of the body 10, but instead are "sandwiched" between their corresponding panel 16 and partition 18. The space between the panels 16 and their corresponding partitions 18a and 18c is relatively small.

Each of the partitions 18b, 18d are disposed inwardly from one of the panels 16 such that there is a vertically disposed space 24 therebetween (i.e., a space which extends along the height of the cart 6). Maintenance of each these spaces 24 is provided by a plurality of spacers 36 which interconnect the partitions 18b and 18d with their corresponding panel 16 and maintain the same in spaced relation. Both partition 18b and

18d include a pair of vertically disposed and laterally spaced split seals 22 which may be formed from overlapping or abutting pieces of rubber or other appropriate "seal-like" materials. Parts stored within the material storage space 26 are at least substantially isolated from at least those components of the material delivery elevator 100 which may potentially adversely affect cleanliness levels via the partitions 18b and 18d and their split seals 22.

The material delivery elevator 100 is illustrated in Figures 2 and 4 and generally includes a platform assembly 102 which supports parts or any other payload contained within the material delivery system 2. Principle components of the platform assembly 102 include an upper plate or platform 104 and a drive assembly mounting plate 120. Movement of the platform assembly 102 along at least a substantially linear or axial path within the body 10 is provided by a drive assembly 136 of the material delivery elevator 100 which is appropriately interconnected with the drive assembly mounting plate 120. In this regard, the drive assembly 136 includes a pair of guide rod assemblies 140 and a pair of lead or drive screw rod assemblies 172 which each extend upwardly from the bottom 34 of the cart 6. The guide rod assemblies 140 and drive screw rod assemblies 172 are disposed at least generally at the four corners 116a-d of the platform assembly 102. One guide rod assembly 140 is disposed at the corner 116d, while the other guide rod assembly 140 is disposed at the corner 116b which is "kitty-corner" or diagonally disposed therefrom. Similarly, one drive screw rod assembly 172 is disposed at the corner 116a, while the other drive screw rod assembly 172 is disposed at the corner 116c which is "kitty-corner" or diagonally disposed therefrom.

Each guide rod assembly 140 includes a shaft or guide rod 144 which is interconnected with the bottom 34 of the cart 6 by one or more fasteners 146 and which extends at least generally perpendicularly upwardly therefrom. Disposed about each guide rod 144 is a guide bushing housing 152 which includes a bushing assembly 154 which slidably interfaces with the guide rod 144. Extending from each guide bushing housing 152 are a pair of vertically spaced connector rods or pins 168. The number of connector rods or pins 168 which is used is not of particular importance. Mounted on the end of each of these connector rods 168 is a mounting block 148, which in turn is interconnected with the drive assembly mounting plate 120 of the platform assembly 102

by one or more fasteners 124. These features are illustrated in the enlarged views of Figures 6A-B in addition to Figure 4.

There are a number of notable features regarding the relationship between each of the guide rod assemblies 140 and the platform assembly 102. First, the guide rod 144 and guide bushing housing 152 of each guide rod assembly 140 are disposed in one of the spaces 24 between one of the panels 16 of the body 10 and one of the partitions 18b, 18d, such that only the connecting rods 168 extend through their corresponding split seals 22. Therefore, there is at least a substantial isolation of the platform assembly 102 from the guide rod 144 and guide bushing housing 152 of each guide rod assembly 140 (i.e., a partition 18b, 18d separates the platform assembly 102 from a substantial portion of each of the guide rod assemblies 140). Furthermore, the interface between the mounting block 148 of each guide rod assembly 140 at least substantially isolates each such mounting block 148 from the upper plate or platform 104 on which the parts will be disposed in the material storage space 26. That is, each mounting block 140 directly interfaces with a lower surface 112 of the platform assembly 102 which is defined by the drive assembly mounting plate 120. Conversely, parts, components, or other materials which are being stored within the material delivery system 2 will be disposed directly or indirectly (e.g., in one or more stacked trays) on an upper surface 108 of the platform assembly 102 which is defined by the upper plate or platform 104 of the elevator 100. Another way of characterizing this relationship is to say that the interconnection between each guide rod assembly 140 and the platform assembly 102 is disposed at a lower elevation than that surface on which parts will be stored, namely the upper surface 108 of the platform assembly 102 which is defined by the platform 104, or at a lower elevation than any part stored in the material storage space 26. Therefore, the relationship between each guide rod assembly 140 and platform assembly 102 of the material delivery elevator 100 is selected so as to further reduce the potential for parts, components, or the like disposed on the platform 104 from being contaminated by either of the guide rod assemblies 140.

Changes in the position of the platform assembly 102 are affected by the noted pair of drive screw rod assemblies 172. Reference will now be made to the enlarged view of Figure 7 in addition to Figure 4. Each drive screw rod assembly 172 includes a

threaded lead or drive screw rod 176 which rotates in one direction to raise the platform assembly 102 within the cart 6, and which rotates in the opposite direction to lower the platform assembly 102 within the cart 6. An upper end of each drive screw rod 176 is rotatably supported by an upper bearing assembly 200. Each upper bearing assembly 200 is appropriately interconnected with the lower surface of the gasket interface section 92 (Figure 2). A lower end of each drive screw rod 176 extends through a drive screw aperture 42 formed on the bottom 34 of the cart 6. Support of this lower end of each drive screw rod 176 is provided by a lower bearing mounting block 180 which is appropriately interconnected with the bottom 34 and which allows for rotation of its corresponding drive screw rod 176.

Disposed about each drive screw rod 176 is a threaded screw rod mount assembly 184. Extending from each screw rod mount assembly 184 is a connector rod or pin 196. The number of connector rods or pins 196 which is used is not of particular importance. Mounted on the end of each of these connector rods 196 is a mounting block 192. The mounting block 192 is interconnected with the lower surface of the drive assembly mounting plate 120 of the platform assembly 102 by one or more fasteners 124.

There are a number of notable features regarding the relationship between each of the drive screw rod assemblies 172 and the platform assembly 102. First, the drive screw rod 176 and screw rod mount assembly 184 of each drive screw rod assembly 172 are disposed in one of the spaces 24 between one of the panels 16 of the body 10 and one of the partitions 18b, 18d, such that each connecting rod 196 extends through one of the split seals 22 on one of these partitions 18b, 18d. Therefore, there is at least a substantial isolation of the platform assembly 102 from the drive screw rod 176 and its corresponding screw rod mount assembly 184 of each drive screw rod assembly 172 (i.e., a partition 18b, 18d separates the platform assembly 102 from a substantial portion of each of the drive screw rod assemblies 172). Furthermore, the interface between the mounting block 192 of each drive screw rod assembly 172 at least substantially isolates each such mounting block 192 from the upper plate or platform 104 on which the parts will be disposed. That is, each mounting block 192 directly interfaces with the lower surface 112 of the platform assembly 102 which is defined by the drive assembly mounting plate 120. Conversely, parts, components, or other materials which are being

stored within the material delivery system 2 will be disposed directly or indirectly (e.g., in one or more stacked trays) on the upper surface 108 of the platform assembly 102 which is defined by the upper plate or platform 104 of the elevator 100. Another way of characterizing this relationship is to say that the interconnection between each drive screw rod assembly 172 and the platform assembly 102 is disposed at a lower elevation than that surface on which parts will be stored, namely the upper surface 108 of the platform assembly 102 which is defined by the platform 104, or at a lower elevation than any part stored in the material storage space 26. Therefore, the relationship between each drive screw rod assembly 172 and platform assembly 102 of the material delivery elevator 100 is selected so as to reduce the potential for parts, components, or the like disposed on the platform 104 from being contaminated by the drive screw rod assemblies 172.

Rotation of each of the drive screw rods 176 changes the position of the platform assembly 102 within the cart 6. In this regard, a screw rod pulley 204 is fixed to the lower end of each of the drive screw rods 176 at a location which is disposed below the bottom 34 of the cart 6 as illustrated back in Figures 4-5. Each screw rod pulley 204 is rotated by a motor 208. This motor 208 is mounted on the bottom 34 of the cart 6 via a pair of motor mounts 220 and a plurality of fasteners 224 such that its drive shaft 212 extends downwardly through a motor aperture 228 which is recessed in the bottom 34 of the cart 6. Fixed to this drive shaft 212 at a location which is disposed below the bottom 34 is a drive pulley or sprocket 216. Transfer of the rotary motion of the drive shaft 212 of the motor 208 to each of the screw rod pulleys 204 is provided by a drive belt 268 which is in the form of a continuous loop. Other continuous loop drive members could also be utilized. Although a direct interconnection could be utilized, in the illustrated embodiment the drive assembly 136 further includes a tensioning pulley 232 and an idler pulley 252. The tensioning pulley 232 is interconnected with the bottom 34 of the cart 6 by a mounting block 236. The tensioning pulley mounting block 236 is disposed within a recess 248 formed on the lower surface of the bottom 34 of the cart 6 and is interconnected therewith by a plurality of fasteners 244. These fasteners 244 extend through slots 240 formed on the tensioning pulley mounting block 236. At least one of the slots 240 is shaped to allow for at least some modification of the position of the

tensioning pulley 232 relative to the bottom 34, to in turn change the tension of the drive belt 268. Similarly, the idler pulley 252 is interconnected with the bottom 34 of the cart 6 by a mounting block 256. The idler pulley mounting block 256 is disposed within a recess 264 formed on the lower surface of the bottom 34 of the cart 6 and is interconnected therewith by a plurality of fasteners 260. These fasteners 260 extend through slots 258 formed on the idler pulley mounting block 256. These slots 258 are not shaped to allow for at least some modification of the position of the idler pulley 252 relative to the bottom 34 in the illustrated embodiment, to in turn change the tension of the drive belt 268, although such could be utilized here as well.

Control of the drive assembly 136 of the material delivery elevator 100 is provided by a drive controller assembly 368 which is presented in Figure 8. The drive controller 368 generally includes a programmable logic control or PLC 392 and a transformer 396, which are powered via a power supply cable 372, as well as a motor controller board 398 and an operator control 380 which are all appropriately interconnected with the motor 208 of the drive assembly 136 for the material delivery elevator 100. The operator control 380 is preferably interconnected with the PLC 392 by a quick disconnect type connector, while a motor command cable 376 which interconnects the motor controller board 398 and the motor 208 also preferably utilizes such a quick disconnect type connector. As such, the "electronics" associated with the material delivery system 2 may remain at the station where the material delivery system 2 is actually being used (e.g., station 400, station 432 to be discussed below), or such that the cart 6 need not include such electronics.

The operator control 380 includes both an "up" button 384 to cause the platform assembly 102 to move in a vertically upward direction and a "down" button 388 to cause the platform assembly 102 to move in a vertically downward direction. In one embodiment, the PLC 392 is structured such that an operator may press the "up" button 384 to place the platform assembly 102 at the desired height within the cart 6 (i.e., at any position desired by the operator), while any engagement of the "down" button 388 will cause the platform assembly 102 to move to its lowermost extreme within the cart 6 (i.e., activation of the "down" button 388 causes the platform assembly 102 to travel to its "bottom dead center" position). In this regard, a sensor trigger or flag 156 is

interconnected with the guide bushing housing 152 of at least one of the guide rod assemblies 140 via one or more fasteners 164 (Figures 4 and 6A-6B), while a sensor 98 is interconnected with the body 10 of the cart 6 (Figure 2) to determine when the platform assembly 102 has reached its uppermost extreme so as to discontinue any further upward travel of the platform assembly 102. Similarly, a sensor trigger or flag 160 is interconnected with the guide bushing housing 152 of at least one of the guide rod assemblies 140 via one or more fasteners 164 (Figures 4 and 6A-6B), while a sensor 96 is interconnected with the body 10 of the cart 6 (Figure 4) to determine when the platform assembly 102 has reached its lowermost extreme so as to discontinue any further downward travel of the platform assembly 102.

Figure 9 depicts the cart 10 with a plurality of trays 94 stacked on the upper surface 108 of the platform assembly 102 (i.e., on the platform 104) which is disposed somewhere between its bottom dead center and top dead center positions. This is a representative position in which the material delivery system 2 will be in when parts are being supplied to an operator, equipment, or both, and which will be discussed in more detail below in relation to Figures 12-14. Each of these trays 94 may include one or more parts, and more typically a plurality of identical parts. The operator may engage the "up" button 384 on the operator control 380 to advance the platform assembly 102 so as to dispose one of the trays 94 at the upper open end 12 of the cart 6. Once all of these parts in this particular tray 94 have been used, the operator may manually remove this now empty tray 94 from the material delivery system 2, such as for appropriate disposal in the case where the trays 94 are disposable (i.e., non-reusable). The operator may then again hit the "up" button 384 on the operator control 380 to further advance the platform assembly 102 in an upwardly direction to place the next "full" tray 94 to the position or elevation desired by the operator/equipment. In its lowermost extreme, the platform assembly 102 is disposed at least about 24 inches (60.96 centimeters) from the open end 12 of the body 10, which emphasizes the desirability of the material delivery elevator 100.

After all of the trays 94 have been emptied in the above-noted manner or when the platform assembly 102 has reached its top dead center position, any further activation of the "up" button 384 by the operator will not have any effect on the position of the

platform assembly 102. The PLC 392 could be structured to thereafter automatically retract the platform assembly 102 to its bottom dead center position. Retraction of the platform assembly 102 to this bottom dead center position may also be affected by engagement of the "down" button 388 on the operator control 380 of the drive controller assembly 368.

Further features of the material delivery system 2 are illustrated in Figure 9. Initially, it can be seen that the enclosed space 26 is divided into an upper chamber 28 and a lower chamber 30. The upper chamber 28 is that portion of the enclosed space 26 which is disposed at a higher elevation or above the platform assembly 102 (i.e., where the parts are stored, and thereby a material storage space or zone), while the lower chamber 30 is that portion of the enclosed space 26 which is disposed at a lower elevation or below the platform assembly 102 (i.e., where various parts of the drive assembly 136 for the material delivery elevator 100 are located). Since the platform assembly 102 moves relative to the body 10 of the cart, the size of the upper chamber 28 and lower chamber 30 changes as well.

Another feature illustrated by consideration of Figure 9, in addition to Figures 4-5, is a sealing/non-sealing feature provided by the material delivery elevator 100 and which is determined by the position of the platform assembly 102. In this regard, the bottom 34 includes a plurality of perforations 38 which fluidly interconnect the lower chamber 30 with the environment in which the material delivery system 2 is disposed. As will be discussed in more detail below, the material delivery system 2 is particularly useful in combination with a minienvironment. Minienvironments, and clean rooms for that matter, typically direct a downward flow of air or other appropriate gases onto the assembly/production area in an attempt to maintain a certain cleanliness level. The presence of material delivery system 2 in these types of applications does not significantly affect the cleanliness levels, and this is due at least in part to the existence of the perforations 38. That is, any air flows to which the material delivery system 2 is exposed are not significantly adversely affected since the flows are allowed to continue downwardly through the material delivery system 2, principally through the upper chamber 28, through a small space between the perimeter of the platform assembly 102 and the partitions 18, and into the lower chamber 30 for discharge to the environment

through the plurality of perforations 38 formed on the bottom 34. Portions of the gasket interface section 92 seals the upper ends of the spaces 24.

Other situations exist in which it would be desirable to actually isolate the contents of the upper chamber 28 from the environment in which the material delivery system 2 is contained, such as during transport of the material delivery system 2 from a loading area to an assembly/processing area where these parts are to be used in some manner (e.g., disk drive assembly). In this regard and continuing to refer to Figures 4, 5, and 9, the material delivery elevator 100 further includes a standoff 128 which is appropriately interconnected with the platform assembly 102 by a plurality of fasteners 132 and which extends at least generally downwardly therefrom. A gasket or other appropriate seal 40 is also disposed about the area of the bottom 34 which contains the plurality of perforations 38 and is appropriately attached to the bottom 34. All of the perforations 38 are thereby disposed inwardly from the gasket 40, which may then be characterized as surrounding or "encircling" the perforated area of the bottom 34 of the cart 6. When the platform assembly 102 is disposed in its bottom dead center position or at its lowermost extreme, the standoff 128 engages the gasket 40 to at least substantially seal the upper chamber 28 from the environment in which the material delivery system 2 is disposed. Fluids from the environment which pass through the perforations 38 at this time are at least substantially precluded from flowing past the seal established by the engagement of the standoff 128 with the gasket 40, and thereby are at least substantially precluded from flowing into the upper chamber 28 where the "clean" parts will be retained. At least after a certain amount of upward travel of the platform assembly 102, via activation of the "up" button 384 on the operator control 380 as discussed above, this seal will be removed by a sufficient disengagement of the standoff 128 from the gasket 40 such that any flows entering the material delivery system 2 may be discharged through the perforations 38 in the above-noted manner.

The end 12 of the body 10 of the cart 6 through which parts are transferred out of the material delivery system 2 is also sealable. As noted above, the material delivery system 2 includes a top or cover 50 which is detachably interconnected with the body 10 at its upper open end 12. Referring now to Figures 10A-D, the cover 50 includes a solid plate 54, a frame 58, and a molding assembly 66 which are appropriately interconnected

by a plurality of fasteners 86. The molding assembly 66 is defined by a plurality of molding sections 70a-k. Four of these molding sections 70, namely molding sections 70b, 70d, 70h, and 70j, each may be further characterized as a first cover latch/lift subassembly 72 which is part of a cover latch/lift assembly 272 for latching the cover 50 onto and lifting the cover away from the body 10 of the cart 6. Each first cover latch/lift subassembly 72 includes a roller 74 which is rotatably supported by and rotatable about an axle 82, as well as a slot 78. These first cover latch/lift subassemblies 72 are appropriately mounted on the frame 58 in a manner such that both the roller 74 and slot 78 downwardly extend entirely through an aperture 62 formed on the frame 58 and through an aligned aperture 56 which extends entirely through the plate 54 (i.e., the roller 74 and slot 78 of each of the first cover latch/lift subassemblies 72 are disposed or extend "below" the cover 50). When mounted on the body 10 of the cart 6, each roller 74 and slot 78 also extend downwardly through an aligned roller aperture 20 in one of the cover support plates 19 so as to extend below such cover support plate 19. Two first cover latch/lift subassemblies 72 are disposed on one pair of opposite sides of the cover 50 in the illustrated embodiment to facilitate removal of the cover 50 from the body 10, although more or less could be utilized. Selection of an appropriate configuration for the rollers 74 may allow at least one first cover latch/lift subassembly 72 to be disposed on each side of the cover 50 (not shown).

Each first cover latch/lift subassembly 72 is engageable by a second cover latch/lift subassembly 328 of the cover latch/lift assembly 272. Refer now to Figures 11A-11D. Generally, the plurality of second cover latch/lift subassemblies 328 (one provided for each first cover latch/lift subassembly 72) is moved between at least two positions to provide the latching and lifting functions. This movement is provided by a pair of latch/lift assembly linkages 300 of the cover latch assembly 272 which are disposed on opposing sides of the cart 6.

Only one latch assembly linkage 300 will be described since each is similarly structured. The latch assembly linkage 300 includes a first link 304, a second link 308, a third link 312, and a fourth link 316. The first link 304 is pivotally interconnected with a mounting bracket 280 by a latch assembly linkage-handle pivot pin 320. The mounting bracket 280 in turn is fixedly attached to a handle 276 for the cart 6, which is in turn

pivotally interconnected with the body 10 of the cart 6 by a handle-cart pivot pin 284. The first link 304 includes a slot 306 in which a pivot pin 318a travels and which pivotally interconnects the first link 304 and its corresponding second link 308.

5 The second link 308 of a given second latch/lift subassembly 328 is pivotally interconnected with the body 10 of the cart 6 by a latch assembly linkage-cart body pivot pin 324. The second link 308 is further pivotally interconnected with the third link 312 by a pivot pin 318b. The third link 312 is also pivotally interconnected with the fourth link 316 by a clevis pin 352 from one of the second latch/lift subassemblies 328. Each
10 clevis pin 352 pivotally interconnects one of the second latch/lift subassemblies 328 with its corresponding latch assembly linkage 300. As such, the other second latch/lift subassemblies 328 is similarly pivotally interconnected with its corresponding fourth link 316 by a clevis pin 352 as well.

Each of the second latch/lift subassemblies 328 includes a first clevis 332a and a second clevis 332b which are pivotally interconnected by the above-noted clevis pin
15 352. A lift roller 340 is also pivotally interconnected with each of the clevis 332a and clevis 332b by the clevis pin 352. The lift roller 340 is further pivotally interconnected with the body 10 of the cart 6 by a bushing 348. A latch 336 is attached to the lift roller 340 by a plurality of fasteners 344 which extend through elongated slots 338 on the latch 336 to provide adjustment capabilities.

20 When the handle 276 is disposed in the position illustrated in Figure 11B, each latch 336 of a second latch/lift subassembly 328 is disposed in the slot 78 of its corresponding first latch/lift subassembly 72 to retain the cover 50 on the body 10 of the cart 6. Subsequent movements of the cover latch/lift assembly 272 will principally be directed to Figure 11B and for purposes of unlatching and then lifting the cover 50,
25 although other drawings may be consulted. When it is desirable to remove the cover 50 to access the upper chamber 28 of the enclosed space 26, the handle 276 is pivoted in the direction of the arrow A. A certain degree of movement of the handle 276 in this direction has no substantial effect on the position of either of the latch/lift assembly linkages 300 due to the slot 306 in each of the first links 304. Engagement of the pins
30 318a against an end 307 of the slots 306 will then cause each of the first links 304 to simultaneously pivot relative to the body 10, which in turn simultaneously pivots each

of the second links 308 in the direction of the arrow B. Pivotation of the second links 308 in the direction of the arrow B in turn causes the corresponding third links 312 and fourth links 316 of each of the latch/lift assembly linkages 300 to move at least generally axially in the direction of the arrow C. This movement of the third links 312 and fourth links 316 causes the second latch/lift subassemblies 328 interconnected therewith to simultaneously pivot in the direction of the arrow D. Each latch 336 is removed from its corresponding slot 78 by this motion of the second latch/lift subassemblies 328. This motion also directs each of the lift rollers 340 upwardly into engagement with their corresponding roller 74 to "lift" the rollers 74 out of its corresponding roller aperture 20 formed in the cover support plates 19 along an at least substantially vertical path so as to dispose the lower surface of the rollers 74 in at least substantially co-planar relation with the upper surface of the cover support plates 19. In this regard, the second latch/lift subassemblies 328 are pivoted so as to dispose an at least substantially flat surface 341 of each lift roller 340 in at least substantially co-planar relation with the upper surface of the cover support plates 19. As such, there is a relatively smooth surface for rolling the cover 50 off of the body 10 of the cart 6. Having 2 or more second latch/lift subassemblies 328 on a pair of opposing sides of the cover 50 provides a certain stability during this movement (e.g., reduces the potential for a "teeter-totter" effect). When it is desired to reinstall the cover 50 on the body 10 and with the cover latch/lift assembly 272 being in the last referenced position, the handle 276 may be pivoted in the opposite direction to that noted above to move each of the components of the cover latch/lift assembly 272 in the opposite direction to that presented above to reinstall the latch 336 of each second latch/lift assembly 328 in the slot 78 of the corresponding first latch/lift subassembly 72. At this time, the handle 276 also of course may be used to push the cart 6 for transportation of the same to another locale.

The material delivery system 2 may be used to provide parts to a station for assembly and/or processing of some kind. One embodiment of such an application is illustrated in Figure 12 in the form of a station 400. The station 400 includes a table 404 which has a plurality of apertures 408 through which trays 428 stacked within a material delivery system 424 may be disposed. That is, the material delivery system 424 is disposed below the table 404 or at a lower elevation than a work surface of the table 404.

In the illustrated embodiment, the material delivery system 424 is not a portable unit, but is instead fixedly interconnected with the station 400. However, the material delivery system 424 includes all other relevant features of the material delivery system 2 discussed above (e.g., a material delivery elevator 100). Part transfer robot 412 may remove one or more parts from one or more of the trays 428 to provide the same to a turntable 416 where such parts may be acted upon by an operator, an assembly robot 420, or both. For instance, the station 400 may be used to assemble an actuator arm assembly stack for a disk drive device.

Another embodiment of an application which may utilize the above-noted principles is illustrated in Figure 13 in the form of a station 432. The station 432 includes a table 436 which has a plurality of apertures 440 through which trays 460 stacked within a material delivery system 456 may be disposed. Again, the material delivery system 456 is disposed below or underneath the table 436 in a similar to the Figure 12 embodiment. In the illustrated embodiment of Figure 13, however, the material delivery system 456 is generally the same as the material delivery system 2 discussed above, and is thereby a portable unit unlike that presented in Figure 12. Part transfer robot 444 may remove one or more parts from one or more of the trays 460 to provide the same to a turntable 448 where such parts may be acted upon by an operator, an assembler 452, or both. For instance, the station 432 may be used to assemble certain parts of a disk drive device.

The material delivery system 2 is particularly adapted for use in filtered environments, including without limitation clean rooms and minienvironments. One embodiment of a minienvironment 464 is presented in Figure 14. The minienvironment 464 includes a frame 468 and an enclosure 470 which defines a material handling zone or workstation in an enclosed space 476. One or more transparent panels 484 may define at least a portion of the enclosure 470, and one or more accesses 472 may exist within the enclosure 470 to provide access to the enclosed space 476. The minienvironment 464 further includes an air flow system 480 for directing filtered air into the enclosed space 476 in a manner which maintains cleanliness at a desired level. A more detailed discussion of minienvironments is presented in U.S. Patent No. 5,487,768, which issued on January 30, 1996, and the entire disclosure of which is incorporated by reference in its entirety herein.

5 Either of the stations 400 or 432 (Figures 12-13) may be used in combination with the minienvironment 464 of Figure 14, although certain adaptations may be required. Moreover, each of the stations 400, 432 may be disposed in a clean room. Clean rooms or minienvironments typically have at least a certain air quality via appropriate filtering, and the use of the material delivery systems disclosed herein does not significantly affect this air quality. In this regard, the filtered environments in which the material delivery system 2 is particularly adapted for use therewith have a low contamination per unit volume, and the material delivery systems do not have a substantial adverse effect on the cleanliness levels of such environments. Another way of characterizing these filtered environments is in reference to Federal Standard 209. The material delivery system 2 may be used in a Class 100 environment or cleaner without significantly affecting the air quality. When sealed, the material delivery systems disclosed herein themselves are capable of maintaining a Class 10 environment.

10 The foregoing description of the present invention has been presented for purposes of illustration and description. Furthermore, the description is not intended to limit the invention to the form disclosed herein. Consequently, variations and modifications commensurate with the above teachings, and skill and knowledge of the relevant art, are within the scope of the present invention. The embodiments described hereinabove are further intended to explain best modes known of practicing the invention and to enable others skilled in the art to utilize the invention in such, or other embodiments and with various modifications required by the particular application(s) or use(s) of the present invention. It is intended that the appended claims be construed to include alternative embodiments to the extent permitted by the prior art.

What is claimed is:

1. A material delivery system for a station, said station being at least within a filtered environment and disposed at a first elevation from a floor, said filtered environment providing clean room-type qualities, said material delivery system comprising:

a sidewall assembly which is disposed continuously about a first vertical reference axis, wherein when said sidewall assembly is interfaced with said station, said sidewall assembly is disposed below said station and thereby has a height which is less than said first elevation; and

a material delivery elevator disposed within said sidewall assembly.

2. A system, as claimed in Claim 1, wherein:

said filtered environment is a minienvironment disposed within a room and said station is part of said minienvironment, and wherein said minienvironment comprises a frame, walls defining an at least substantially enclosed space, at least one access to said at least substantially enclosed space from outside said minienvironment, and a filtered gas delivery system fluidly interconnected with said at least substantially enclosed space for directing a gas flow from outside said enclosed space to within said enclosed space.

3. A system, as claimed in Claim 1, wherein:

said filtered environment is a clean room.

4. A system, as claimed in Claim 1, wherein:

said station comprises an opening which is vertically aligned with said elevator.

5. A system, as claimed in Claim 1, wherein:

said station comprises at least one material handling zone which is aligned with said elevator.

6. A system, as claimed in Claim 1, wherein:

said station further comprises a workstation for affecting at least one operation on at least one product.

7. A system, as claimed in Claim 1, wherein:

said filtered environment has a cleanliness level of at least a Class 100.

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8. A system, as claimed in Claim 1, wherein:

said material delivery system comprises a portable cart, said sidewall assembly being part of said cart, said cart thereby removable from beneath said station.

9. A system, as claimed in Claim 8, wherein:

5 said material delivery system further comprises a removable top for sealing an upper opening defined by said sidewall assembly.

10. A system, as claimed in Claim 1, wherein:

said material delivery system further comprises wheels interconnected with said sidewall assembly.

10 11. A system, as claimed in Claim 1, wherein:

said sidewall assembly is fixedly interconnected with said station.

12. A system, as claimed in Claim 1, wherein:

said elevator comprises a vertically movable platform.

13. A system, as claimed in Claim 12, further comprising:

15 a plurality of trays stacked on said platform, wherein each said tray comprises a plurality of parts.

14. A system, as claimed in Claim 13, wherein:

each said tray is disposable.

15. A system, as claimed in Claim 12, wherein:

20 said platform is movable between a lowermost and uppermost position, wherein said lowermost position is disposed at least about 24 inches (60.96 centimeters) below said first elevation.

16. A system, as claimed in Claim 12, wherein:

25 said elevator comprises means for disposing said platform in any vertical position relative to said sidewall assembly.

17. A system, as claimed in Claim 12, wherein:

said elevator comprises a drive assembly, said station comprises a drive assembly controller, and said drive assembly and said drive assembly controller are interconnected by at least one communications cable.

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18. A system, as claimed in Claim 12, wherein:

said platform separates a space within said sidewall assembly into upper and lower chambers.

19. A system, as claimed in Claim 18, wherein:

5 a space exists between a perimeter of said platform and at least a portion of said sidewall assembly to allow for an air flow from said upper chamber to said lower chamber.

20. A system, as claimed in Claim 19, wherein:

10 said material delivery system further comprises a bottom interconnected with said sidewall assembly, said bottom comprising a plurality of perforations through which air passing from said upper chamber and into said lower chamber exits said material delivery system.

21. A system, as claimed in Claim 12, wherein:

15 said platform comprises an upper platform surface and each interconnection between said platform and a remainder of said elevator is disposed below said upper platform surface.

22. A system, as claimed in Claim 12, wherein:

said elevator further comprises a plurality of at least substantially vertically disposed rods.

20 23. A system, as claimed in Claim 22, wherein:

at least one of said plurality of at least substantially vertically disposed rods is a rotatably driven lead screw.

24. A system, as claimed in Claim 12, wherein:

25 said platform comprises first, second, third, and fourth corners, said first corner is diagonally disposed from said third corner, said second corner is diagonally disposed from said fourth corner, said elevator comprises first and second lead screws disposed at least substantially at said first and third corners, and said elevator further comprises first and second guide rods disposed at least substantially at said second and fourth corners.

25. A system, as claimed in Claim 12, wherein:

30 said material delivery system further comprises a bottom, said bottom comprises a gasket which defines a closed boundary, said platform comprises upper and lower

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surfaces, and said elevator further comprises an extension interconnected with said lower surface of said platform and sealingly engageable with said gasket at least when said elevator is disposed in its lowermost position within said sidewall assembly.

26. A system, as claimed in Claim 25, wherein:

5 said bottom comprises a plurality of perforations, wherein all of said perforations are disposed interiorly of said boundary defined by said gasket.

27. A system, as claimed in Claim 1, further comprising:

a containment disposed within said sidewall assembly, said elevator being disposed within said containment.

10 28. A system, as claimed in Claim 27, wherein:

each interconnection between said platform and a remainder of said elevator is disposed in a space between said containment and said sidewall assembly.

29. A system, as claimed in Claim 27, wherein:

15 said containment comprises at least one at least generally vertically extending split seal, wherein a first interconnection between said platform and a remainder of said elevator extends through said split seal.

30. A system, as claimed in Claim 27, wherein:

20 said containment comprises a plurality of vertically extending split seals, wherein each interconnection between said platform and a remainder of said elevator extends through one of said split seals.

31. A system, as claimed in Claim 1, wherein:

25 said material delivery system comprises a bottom, said elevator comprises a motor disposed within said sidewall assembly vertically between said platform and said bottom, said motor comprises a drive shaft which extends downwardly through said bottom, and said elevator further comprises at least one lead screw which also extends downwardly through said bottom and a continuous loop drive transfer member which interconnects said drive shaft with said at least one lead screw.

32. A system, as claimed in Claim 1, wherein:

30 said platform comprises first and second sides, said elevator comprises first and second lead screws interconnected with said first and second sides, respectively, and said

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elevator further comprises a rotary drive interconnected with each of said first and second lead screws.

33. A system, as claimed in Claim 32, further comprising:

first and second vertically disposed partitions positioned between said sidewall assembly and said first and second sides, respectively, of said platform, wherein said first and second lead screws are disposed in a space between said sidewall assembly and said first and second partitions, respectively;

first and second vertically disposed split seals on said first and second partitions, respectively; and

first and second connectors between said platform and said first and second lead screws, respectively, which extend through said first and second split seals, respectively.

34. A system, as claimed in Claim 1, wherein:

said material delivery system further comprises a body which in turn comprises said sidewall assembly and a first open end;

a cover removably interconnected with said body and which closes said first open end; and

a cover lifting assembly.

35. A system, as claimed in Claim 34, wherein:

said cover lifting assembly comprises means for displacing said cover away from said body along an at least substantially axial path.

36. A system, as claimed in Claim 35, wherein:

said body comprises at least one cover support surface, wherein said cover comprises a lower surface comprising a gasket which is sealingly engageable with said at least one cover support surface.

37. A system, as claimed in Claim 36, wherein:

said means for lifting comprises means for reducing degradation of said gasket by operation of said means for lifting.

38. A system, as claimed in Claim 34, wherein:

said cover lifting assembly comprises means for pushing said cover at least generally vertically upwardly and away from said body.

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39. A system, as claimed in Claim 34, wherein:

said at least one cover support surface comprises at least one first aperture, wherein said cover comprises at least one first extension, wherein each said first extension extends downwardly through its corresponding said first aperture and comprises a first latching member and a first camming member, and wherein said cart further comprises a second latching member for each said first latching member and a second camming member for each said first camming member, wherein each said second latching member and said second camming member is movably interconnected with said body.

40. A system, as claimed in Claim 39, wherein:

each said first latching member is fixedly interconnected with its own said first camming member to define a first latch/cam pair, wherein each said second latching member is fixedly interconnected with its own said second camming member to define a second latch/cam pair, wherein each second latch/cam pair is movable from a first position to a second position, wherein when each said second latch/cam pair is in said first position, each said first latching member is lockingly engaged with its corresponding said second latching member, and wherein when each said second latch/cam pair is moved from said first position at least toward said second position, each said first latching member becomes disengaged from its corresponding said second latching member and each said second camming member exerts an at least generally upwardly directed force on its corresponding first camming member to dispose said first latch/cam pair out of its corresponding said first aperture.

41. A system, as claimed in Claim 40, wherein:

each said first camming member comprises a rotatable roller, and wherein each said second camming member comprises a first planar surface which is disposed at least substantially parallel with its corresponding said cover support surface by each said second camming member being disposed within its corresponding said first aperture.

42. A material delivery system for use with a filtered environment which provides clean room-type qualities, said system comprising:

an enclosure comprising a first material storage space which is at least substantially isolatable from an environment in which said enclosure is positioned;



at least one removable access to said first material storage space;
an enclosure transport system interconnected with said enclosure; and
a material delivery elevator disposed within said enclosure in interfacing relation
with said material storage space and which is different from said enclosure transport
system.

43. A system, as claimed in Claim 42, wherein:

said enclosure further comprises a sidewall assembly which is disposed
continuously about a first vertical reference axis and which defines an upper opening, and
said at least one removable access comprises a top which detachably closes said upper
opening.

44. A system, as claimed in Claim 42, further comprising:

means for compressing said at least one removable access against an interfacing
portion of said enclosure.

45. A system, as claimed in Claim 42, wherein:

said enclosure transport system comprises a plurality of rolling members
interconnected with a lower portion of said enclosure.

46. A system, as claimed in Claim 42, wherein:

said elevator comprises a platform which is vertically movable within said
enclosure.

47. A system, as claimed in Claim 46, further comprising:

a plurality of trays stacked on said platform, wherein each said tray comprises a
plurality of parts.

48. A system, as claimed in Claim 46, wherein:

said elevator comprises means for disposing said platform in a vertical position
within and relative to said enclosure through operator input.

49. A system, as claimed in Claim 46, wherein:

said platform defines a lower portion of said first material storage space such that
said first material storage space extends above said platform, and said enclosure further
comprises a second space disposed below said platform.

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50. A system, as claimed in Claim 49, wherein:

a space exists between at least a portion of a perimeter of said platform and an adjacent portion of said enclosure to allow for an air flow from said first material storage space into said second space.

5 51. A system, as claimed in Claim 50, wherein:

said enclosure further comprises a bottom, said second space is disposed at least somewhere between said bottom and said platform, said bottom comprises a plurality of perforations through which air passing from said first material storage space and into said second space, via said space between said platform and said enclosure, exits said enclosure at least for a certain relative position between said elevator and said enclosure.

10 52. A system, as claimed in Claim 51, wherein:

said bottom further comprises a gasket disposed about an area containing all of said plurality of perforations, said elevator further comprises an extension interconnected with said platform and sealingly engageable with said gasket at least when said elevator is disposed in its lowermost position within said enclosure so as to isolate said first material storage space from an environment in which said enclosure is disposed and including to isolate said first material storage space from said plurality of perforations, and said extension disengages said gasket after a predetermined amount of travel of said platform away from said bottom.

15 53. A system, as claimed in Claim 49, wherein:

said enclosure further comprises a bottom, said second space is disposed at least somewhere between said bottom and said platform, said elevator comprises a motor disposed within said second space, said motor comprises a drive shaft which extends downwardly through said bottom, and said elevator further comprises at least one lead screw which also extends downwardly through said bottom and a continuous loop drive transfer member which is disposed below said bottom and interconnects said drive shaft with said at least one lead screw.

20 54. A system, as claimed in Claim 46, wherein:

said platform comprises an upper platform surface and each interconnection between said platform and a remainder of said elevator is disposed below said upper platform surface.

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55. A system, as claimed in Claim 46, wherein:

said elevator further comprises at least one substantially vertically disposed support interconnected with and suspending said platform within said enclosure.

56. A system, as claimed in Claim 55, wherein:

5 at least one of said plurality of supports is a rotatably driven lead screw.

57. A system, as claimed in Claim 56, wherein:

at least one of said plurality of supports is a guide rod.

58. A system, as claimed in Claim 55, further comprising:

10 means for isolating each of said plurality of supports from said first material storage space.

59. A system, as claimed in Claim 46, wherein:

15 said platform comprises first and second sides, said elevator comprises first and second lead screws interconnected with said first and second sides, respectively, and said elevator further comprises a rotary drive interconnected with each of said first and second lead screws.

60. A system, as claimed in Claim 59, further comprising:

20 first and second vertically disposed partitions positioned between said enclosure and said first and second sides, respectively, of said platform, wherein said first and second lead screws are disposed in a space between said enclosure and said first and second partitions, respectively;

first and second vertically disposed split seals on said first and second partitions, respectively; and

first and second connectors between said platform and said first and second lead screws, respectively, which extend through said first and second split seals, respectively.

25 61. A system, as claimed in Claim 46, wherein:

30 said platform comprises first, second, third, and fourth corners, said first corner is diagonally disposed from said third corner, said second corner is diagonally disposed from said fourth corner, said elevator comprises first and second lead screws disposed at least substantially at said first and third corners and interconnected with said platform, and said elevator further comprises first and second guide rods disposed at least substantially at said second and fourth corners and interconnected with said platform.



62. A clean cart for use in a filtered environment, said cart comprising:
a body comprising a sidewall assembly disposed about a first reference axis, a
bottom, and a first open end;

a cover removably interconnected with said body to close said first open end,
wherein an enclosed material storage area is defined at least in part by said body and said
cover, and wherein a contamination level within said material storage is capable of being
maintained at least as clean as a Class 100 environment; and

a cover lifting assembly.

63. A cart, as claimed in Claim 62, wherein:

said cover lifting assembly comprises means for displacing said cover away from
said body along an at least substantially axial path.

64. A cart, as claimed in Claim 63, wherein:

said body comprises at least one cover support surface, wherein said cover
comprises a lower surface comprising a gasket which is sealingly engageable with said
at least one cover support surface.

65. A cart, as claimed in Claim 64, wherein:

said means for lifting comprises means for reducing degradation of said gasket
by operation of said means for lifting.

66. A cart, as claimed in Claim 62, wherein:

said cover lifting assembly comprises means for pushing said cover at least
generally vertically upwardly and away from said body.

67. A cart, as claimed in Claim 62, wherein:

said body comprises at least one cover support surface, wherein said at least one
cover support surface comprises at least one aperture, wherein said cover comprises a
lower surface, wherein said cover further comprises a plurality of wheels which extend
away from said lower surface, and wherein each said wheel is disposable downwardly
through one of said apertures.

68. A cart, as claimed in Claim 67, wherein:

said cover lifting assembly comprises said plurality of wheels.

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69. A cart, as claimed in Claim 67, wherein:

said cover further comprises a gasket attached to said lower surface, wherein said gasket extends a first distance away from said lower surface and said plurality of wheels each extend a second distance away from said lower surface, wherein said second distance is greater than said first distance whereby when each of said plurality of wheels is engaged with at least one of said cover support surfaces, said plurality of wheels maintain said gasket and said at least one cover support surface in spaced relation.

70. A cart, as claimed in Claim 62, wherein:

said cover comprises a lower surface which projects toward said body and a gasket attached to at least a portion of said lower surface.

71. A cart, as claimed in Claim 62, wherein:

said body further comprises a pair of cover support surfaces, wherein said cover support surfaces are disposed on opposite sides of said body.

72. A cart, as claimed in Claim 62, wherein:

said body further comprises at least one cover support surface.

73. A cart, as claimed in Claim 72, wherein:

said at least one cover support surface comprises at least one latch aperture, wherein said cover comprises at least one first latch member, wherein each said first latch member extends downwardly through its corresponding said latch aperture, wherein said cart further comprises at least one second latch member, and wherein each said second latch member is interconnected with said body and is lockingly engageable with its corresponding said first latch member.

74. A cart, as claimed in Claim 72, wherein:

said at least one cover support surface comprises at least one first aperture, wherein said cover comprises at least one first cover dismount member, wherein each said first cover dismount member extends downwardly through its corresponding said first aperture, wherein said cart further comprises at least one second cover dismount member, wherein each said second cover dismount member is movably interconnected with said body and is engageable with its corresponding said first cover dismount member, and wherein said cover lifting assembly comprises each of said first and second cover dismount members.



75. A cart, as claimed in Claim 74, wherein:

each said second cover dismount member is movable to dispose its corresponding said first cover dismount member out of its corresponding said first aperture by engagement therewith.

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76. A cart, as claimed in Claim 72, wherein:

said at least one cover support surface comprises at least one first aperture, wherein said cover comprises at least one first extension, wherein each said first extension extends downwardly through its corresponding said first aperture, wherein said cart further comprises means for engaging each said first extension to retain said cover on said body, and wherein said cover lifting assembly comprises means for pushing each said first extension out of its corresponding said first aperture to remove said cover from said body.

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77. A cart, as claimed in Claim 72, wherein:

said at least one cover support surface comprises at least one first aperture, wherein said cover comprises at least one first extension, wherein each said first extension extends downwardly through its corresponding said first aperture and comprises a first latching member and a first camming member, and wherein said cart further comprises a second latching member for each said first latching member and a second camming member for each said first camming member, wherein each said second latching member and said second camming member is movably interconnected with said body.

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78. A cart, as claimed in Claim 77, wherein:

each said first latching member is fixedly interconnected with its own said first camming member to define a first latch/cam pair, wherein each said second latching member is fixedly interconnected with its own said second camming member to define a second latch/cam pair, wherein each second latch/cam pair is movable from a first position to a second position, wherein when each said second latch/cam pair is in said first position, each said first latching member is lockingly engaged with its corresponding said second latching member, and wherein when each said second latch/cam pair is moved from said first position at least toward said second position, each said first latching member becomes disengaged from its corresponding said second latching

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member and each said second camming member exerts an at least generally upwardly directed force on its corresponding first camming member to dispose said first latch/cam pair out of its corresponding said first aperture.

79. A cart, as claimed in Claim 78, wherein:

5 each said first camming member comprises a rotatable roller, and wherein each said second camming member comprises a first planar surface which is disposed at least substantially parallel with its corresponding said cover support surface by each said second camming member being disposed within its corresponding said first aperture.

80. A cart, as claimed in Claim 62, wherein:

10 said first open end projects vertically upwardly.

