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Making Your Schedule Sacred

Building/Remodeling How To Articles

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For accountants, scheduling is easy. It's simple for lawyers, too, not to mention doctors, dentists and the countless office workers that are perpetually plugged into their hand held wireless devices. For them, the routine of predictable business cycles and standing deadlines makes scheduling a breeze.

For builders, however, scheduling is more like a microburst. Neither gentle nor smooth, its winds are sudden and uncertain, according to James Techam, president of Vision Remodeling in Little Canada, Minn. "One of the most difficult things in our industry is estimating your time," he says. "You try to make an educated guess, but there are so many unknowns."

Just because scheduling is difficult, however, doesn't mean that it's not important. In fact, scheduling is critical. "Generally, the more delays you have, the more money [a project] costs, the more stress you have and the worse your relationship is with your customer," says time management expert Kerul Kassel, the Orlando-based author of *Stop Procrastinating Now* and *Productive Procrastination*. "[Scheduling] is all about planning, so as to reduce the cost and stress, and improve client relations."

Indeed, creating accurate schedules—and sticking to them—is paramount to project success. Because doing so will keep your costs low and your customers happy, here are five steps for achieving scheduling success.

1. Set Scheduling Goals

In construction as in all business, half the battle in scheduling is prioritization. Until you decide what's important, Kassel suggests, your productivity will suffer.

"Without a schedule, work takes a lot longer," she says. "There have been studies in procrastination showing that items that don't have a deadline often get put off indefinitely, and they definitely take longer to do than the items that have deadlines."

In addition to making schedules a priority, contractors should define their own measures for scheduling success. Is it important for you to get things done quickly, for instance, or to get things done right? Set priorities and create your schedules with these considerations in mind.

“People value speed, but they don’t value speed at the cost of quality, and they don’t value the promise of speed at the expense of missed deadlines,” Kassel continues. “Generally, ‘on schedule’ means that you adhere to a timetable. That’s all it might be. That timetable could be fast or it could be slower. It could reflect the desire to enhance speed or to under-promise and over-deliver.”

2. Plan Your Project

No matter what your scheduling goals are, the key to meeting them is proper planning, according to Techam. Prior to the start of any job, he suggests doing the following in order to get your schedule off to a good running start:

- **Complete an on-site walk through:** Before he starts any project, Techam takes a full tour of the job site with his team, including his subcontractors, in order to assess the workload and generate task-specific timetables.
- **Create and distribute printed schedules:** Once Techam and his team have agreed on project timetables, he creates a schedule with specific line items and then prints out and distributes copies to everyone involved with the project, including the homeowners so that they know from the get-go what to expect from the project.
- **Get sign-offs on all selections:** Because change orders are the single largest cause of scheduling snafus, Techam works with homeowners to make all selections and decisions prior to the start of the project. To further eliminate confusion and prevent delays at the time of installation, he has homeowners physically sign off on their choices.

3. Collaborate and Cooperate

Of course, it’s not enough to establish a schedule at the start of the job. In order to stick to it and finish your project on time, you must continue referencing it and editing it throughout the duration of the job.

To make sure that the schedule you started with is relevant and workable every week, Techam recommends holding weekly production meetings at your office with supervisors, crew and other key individuals. Doing so gives you a chance to connect and collaborate with one another, he says. If there are problems and issues with the project, the group can talk them out together and, if necessary, revise the project timeline. If a quick fix is needed, team members can pool their resources together to share ideas and get back on track.

“The company meeting is a chance to get together and go over schedules,” Techam says. “It gives everyone in the company a chance to offer updates and give feedback.”

4. Invest in Scheduling Tools

Because organization and scheduling go hand-in-hand, Kassel recommends investing in tools that will help you automate your scheduling tasks.

Although there are dozens of project management applications designed specifically for the construction industry—including Projectmates, Corecon and Meridian Systems’

Prolog, to name just a few—general-purpose office applications like Microsoft’s Outlook and SharePoint offer an effective and affordable way to communicate and consolidate your scheduling tasks.

“Something as simple as a paper calendar can suffice as long as you’re thinking about your day, your week and your month ahead,” Kassel says.

5. Commit to Communication

Because schedules are never set in stone, the most important aspect of scheduling is communication, according to Techam.

“We have a standing meeting with the homeowners once a week and daily communication with them via e-mail or phone,” he says. “The communication keeps them aware of where the project is at and it helps them understand, if there’s a delay, why there’s a delay and what we’re doing to correct it.”

Techam’s weekly meeting with homeowners takes shape in the form of an in-person job site walk through, which gives him a chance to interact with customers on a personal level and physically show them problems and progress. Not only does that clear up confusion, he says, but it also builds relationships. It makes homeowners feel taken care of, which increases their satisfaction and their willingness to give future referrals.

“Communication is huge,” Kassel concludes. “People want to know what’s going on. You have to actively manage their expectations in order to keep your relationship with them stable.”