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Working through the Winter Part 2: Winter Challenges

Building/Remodeling Tools and Technology

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In snowbelt cities like Chicago, Cleveland and Buffalo, N.Y., winter isn't just a season—it's an adversary. That's because bitter cold, high winds and heavy snowfall can bring even the most prepared cities to a standstill; closing roads, schools, airports and more—including construction job sites.

Just ask Indianapolis-based builder Steve Gray, president of Steve Gray Renovations, who keeps a watchful eye on the weather so that he can respond quickly and effectively.

"Most definitely the winter is more work," Gray says. "We have to be very proactive in the wintertime and plan, plan and extra plan. We watch the weather a lot because we need to know what the weather's doing as we make plans for moving our projects forward to their next steps."

With brutally low temperatures, snow and shorter days, working in the winter can be tough on workers and tools. But builders must keep their eyes on the sky to prepare for winter's worst, which can slow projects down and, as a result, slow profits down, too.

Consider these tips from snowbelt builders for winterizing your people, your policies and your projects:

- **Be proactive:** Because winter days have upwards of six fewer hours of daylight than summer days, Gray sometimes struggles with worker productivity and morale. To make sure workers are punctual, pleased and productive Gray recommends focusing on planning and communication. "What it really comes down to is watching the weather and having great communication with your contractors," he says. "We think about what the weather's going to do and we prepare all week for it. If it's going to be bad, we have to be highly organized and communicate with our vendors and

- subcontractors to rearrange our schedules and be proactive about the weather.”
- **Practice smart storage:** While hand tools are generally all-weather, motorized and rotary tools—such as drills, saws and air compressors—are not. Chicago-based builder Nick DiCosola, president of Distinguished Dwellings, suggests storing that type of equipment indoors overnight; if it’s kept outside, in a garage or in the back of a truck, it may not perform the next morning. The same is true of adhesives and glues, says fellow Chicago builder Chris Donatelli, president of Donatelli Builders Inc., who suggests thawing solids in a running vehicle if they’re frozen. Even building materials should be kept warm, according to Gray, who recommends always storing them covered and off the ground.
 - **Schedule deliveries strategically:** To keep materials safe, DiCosola has vendors store them for him, that way materials are not left open to the elements. “If I’m framing a house, normally I’d say deliver the deck and walls for the first floor,” he says. “In the winter I’ll say deliver the deck, then give me a day or two and deliver the walls so that things don’t have to sit out in the cold.”
 - **Build a roof over your head:** Like DiCosola schedules deliveries, Gray schedules work building exterior structures to get the home covered so that work can continue on the interior of the home. “We want to get the roof on the home as fast as possible,” he says. “Once the home is weathered tight, insulated and the drywall is installed on the ceilings we want to get the permanent heat on in the home. We don’t want to finish the house with temporary heat. We want the actual heating and cooling systems in the house because it helps it get acclimated to the conditions it’s going to be in once it’s lived in and because it’s better for the product; drywall, for instance, dries better.” For exterior work, Donatelli sometimes recommends setting up a heating structure with scaffolding around the building.
 - **Take advantage of warm spells:** Some work just can’t be done in below freezing temperatures. Concrete, for instance, won’t cure when there’s frost in the ground. Although there are now additives that make curing cold concrete easier, Gray suggests putting down straw or concrete insulator blankets during warm spells to keep the ground thawed in advance of scheduled concrete work.
 - **Invest in seasonal equipment and relationships:** Winter weather often mandates special equipment, such as snowplows and propane heaters. Because purchasing that equipment can be prohibitively expensive, DiCosola suggests building relationships with local rental companies that can give you what you need, when you need it.
 - **Keep things clean:** Because keeping a clear path to your job site is critical, snow removal is key, according to DiCosola, who typically orders extra loads of stone for creating an all-weather road into his job site that makes access easy for workers and deliverymen.
 - **Spend smartly:** Although access is important, you shouldn’t be paying your contractors to shovel snow, says DiCosola. “If two feet of snow drops on us, there’s no sense in me having a crew of framers at that house shoveling snow at the rate I’m paying them,” he says. “So what I try to do is, if I see snow coming, I call laborers a day before and have them show up an hour before my crew so that I’m not paying framers \$40 an hour to shovel.”

No matter what they do to prepare their job sites for winter weather, sometimes builders just have to throw in the towel and order a snow day, according to Donatelli.

“If it’s five degrees out and the wind’s blowing like crazy, it doesn’t make sense to work that day because you’re probably not going to get anything done,” he says. “You have to

use good judgment. Every day has to be evaluated based on the circumstances you're dealt."

[Click here to check out Working through the Winter Part 1: Winter Safety.](#)