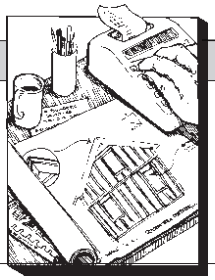
The Tap Dance: Scheduling Part 1



by Sal Alfano

Scheduling is the key to keeping a building business in order—this includes both *job scheduling* and *seasonal scheduling.* Job scheduling is the technique of planning the work on a particular job to meet the time requirements. Of course, builders are constantly faced with the prospect of repeating this process several times in a single season, with jobs of varying size and scope and overlapping start and completion times. This is where seasonal scheduling comes in: to coordinate multiple jobs over the course of the building season. Obviously, these two tasks are closely-related and add up to a monumental task. To get started, you must first gather preliminary information.

Labor Requirements

First and foremost, you must know what labor is available. You need enough qualified people to perform the work you plan to contract. The best policy is to maintain a core of veteran employees whose abilities are a known quantity on which you can rely from season to season. This enables you to predict available manpower with some certainty and to use your crews' varying degrees of skill to best advantage.

In boom times, the next best thing is to hire extra help as you need it, preferably from a pool of people you have hired before, Again, known degrees of skill and rates of production are important. It will be almost impossible to determine how much time a mongrel crew will take to complete a given job. Two other things are essential. Make sure one of your long-term employees will be available to supervise the extra help. They will save you time by explaining your normal methods for you, and they'll insure a higher quality, more consistent product. Finally, be sure to tap the extra help as early in the season as possible, before the pool dries up. This will depend, of course, on the kind of season you anticipate.

Boom or Bust

Preliminary scheduling requires a little crystal-bail gazing. But predicting the coming building climate is not all guesswork. The trick is to use your available resources well in advance to anticipate the demand for your services. Architects and designers for whom you regularly bid work are good places to start. Find out what projects they have on the boards and what's ahead. Excavators are another source. Often, owners will talk to an excavator about their upcoming project long before they've decided on a builder. The same is true of realtors and bankers. If you consider it, there are a slew of people who can help you predict the volume of work that's likely to lie ahead.

The longer you've been in business, the more your catalog of former clients becomes a base for future work. Not only will you get referrals, but you will find yourself doing a fair amount of repeat business. The owner for whom you built a house last year may want to add a deck or covered porch this year. The key is to find this out early enough to make room in the schedule. The best approach is often to simply come out and ask your former clients directly. They will likely appreciate your professional attitude, and you'll get a jump on your schedule. Smaller projects can be scheduled in advance for slow times, like winter. Even exterior work can be scheduled during the slower winter season if you plan for it in advance. For example, a deck can be scheduled for footings and piers in the fall before frost, with the carpentry slated for winter or early spring, when nothing's doing.

By surveying the results of these preliminary investigations, you will get an idea of how the season will shape up. In a bust year, you may want to take on a greater number of small projects, or switch your emphasis from new construction to renovation. In a boom year, you can pick and choose the work more carefully, concentrating on projects that will make the most money with the fewest number of headaches.

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When, How Long, and Who

Having too little work in the offing presents problems of its own, but we're talking here about a more favorable problem: having too much to do. In this case, three questions must be answered for you to schedule successfully: What are the start and completion dates? How long will it take to perform the work? Who will be available to do what?

As to start and finish dates, most customers are only concerned about the latter. They want the addition done by their daughter's graduation day. But don't fall into the trap of promising a finish date until you can nail down a starting date. Owners and architects almost always underestimate the amount of time it will take to draw up the plans and specs, estimate costs, make the revisions, and write the contract, all of which must be done before you break ground. Be realistic. If you need two weeks to estimate costs, say so, and adjust the start and finish time accordingly.

Hedge again with your subcontractors. It's better for everyone if you have a tentative start date on a job for which the contract is not yet in hand than to be scratching around trying to get people there on short notice. Notify your key subcontractors—excavators, concrete crews, well drillers, roofers—in advance of the possibility of a certain job starting on such and such a date. Be up front with them, and let them know that it might be revised. They'll appreciate the help it gives them in their own planning.

When it comes to figuring out how long a specific project is going to take, don't let anyone else's opinions affect your own tried-and-true judgement. Remember, the average owner has no idea about how long it takes to build a house; he just knows when he wants to move in. Don't consent to owners' unrealistic timetables; educate them as early as you can. You're better off losing the job than agreeing to an impossible deadline.

When considering calendar-day completion schedules, be sure to allow for delays. Weather will interfere with the work of several key operations—excavation, concrete, and roofing, for example. And remember, the weather doesn't know what your timetable is. Two weeks of rain just before your job starts will likely put you just as far behind as two weeks of rain after you start, because the subs you're planning to use will fall behind on the projects they're doing prior to yours.

The same is true for changes in the work. Almost all change orders are written for additional work, which takes additional time. Make sure you allow for it in your schedule. Finally, customized items—windows, for example—require long lead times. If you can't install the siding because you haven't received the windows yet, you're in trouble. Certain other items—light fixtures, plumbing fixtures, and locksets are good examples—are often not chosen until well after the job has begun. If you see a dangerous delay developing because of late orders, or slow delivery of key elements, make the appropriate adjustment as early as possible. It's best to provide for contingencies like this in your contracts. But whatever you do, keep you clients informed. They'd much rather hear about a delay sooner than later. Also, if they need to make choices to keep things moving, a little gentle prodding can work wonders.

Finally, you have to determine who is going to do the work. If your pattern is to do everything with your own crews, then projects will take up more of the available time in your schedule because all of your labor will be tied up. If it looks like a really busy season ahead, consider subcontracting more than usual the excavation, concrete, plumbing and electrical systems. You can gain a lot of time by letting out other portions of the work. If you sub the roofing and drywall, you free up your crew for exterior trim and siding. If you sub the finish work or cabinet installation, you will have more people available to get the next job going. If you can manage the increased volume, more work should mean more profits. Next month, we will discuss the mechanics of scheduling—how to track and update all the scheduling information once you obtain it. ■

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