

Simple Scheduling For Remodelers

Two simple charts will help keep employees, subs, and suppliers informed and on track

by
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For years our company has struggled with scheduling our remodeling projects. Not so surprisingly, all jobs seem to take on an identity of their own. What works for a bathroom remodel doesn't necessary work for a bedroom addition. And even "standard" kitchen remodels can be as different as day and night.

Besides, as most of us have discovered the hard way, scheduling a remodel is a little like charming a snake—as soon as you think you've got it made and relax a little, the snake gets restless and bites you. So why spend your valuable time scheduling for a business dominated by Murphy's Law?

Well, as long as your company is doing only a few jobs at a time and you can personally supervise all of them, you can get by without too much structure. But as soon as things get a little more complex, you have to rely on your employees who may not have the hands-on remodeling experience it takes to anticipate the changing needs of a lot of jobs. In that sense, a good working schedule helps by building out each project on paper.

This is true in my own business—with a slight wrinkle. I grew up learning the “kick ‘em in the butt” system of motivational management. Sadly, while I was perfecting this technique, the management industry switched tracks and began to employ the “pat ‘em on the back” method of motivation.

So here I am, completely competent in an outdated motivational skill, and totally frustrated in my vain attempts to master the new technique. Out of necessity, I developed a scheduling system that would allow others (more skilled in the new motivational approach and less skilled in remodeling) to run our projects smoothly, to

cover our overhead, and to still make a profit.

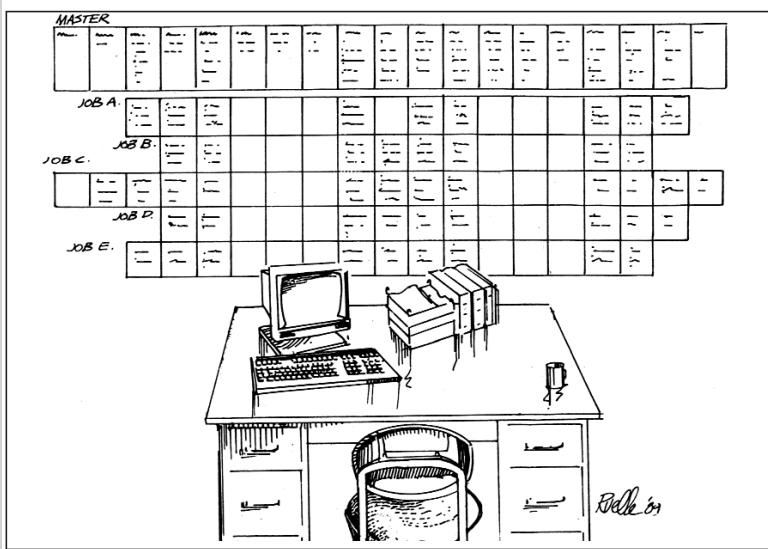
Getting Started

The best-kept secret in creating a schedule is to keep it simple; simple enough that your office staff will be able to use it to keep your jobs on track.

The second best-kept secret in scheduling is using the schedules themselves—they should be right up there on the wall (see lead illustration). They also should be in the hands of your subcontractors, and can even be shown to your customers. But I'll get to that in a minute.

The best time to schedule is when it's quiet and there will be few or no interruptions. Write down questions you need answers to and get those answers later, if possible. Of course if you have several people capable of scheduling, you may want to employ the think tank method and plan together. The key here to experiment until you find out what works best. For our company I usually do the rough draft and then call in one or two superintendents to work through it.

Over the years our company has tried many different types of scheduling systems. what we've settled on is a hybrid of Pert (Project Evaluation and review Technique) and CPM (Critical Path Method), with a healthy dose of SWG (Sophisticated Wild Guessing) thrown in for good measure. Sounds impressive, but it couldn't be simpler. First, we make up a master schedule, which helps coordinate employees and subcontractors, and includes deliveries from all materials suppliers. Then we keep an individual schedule for each job that shows which employees, subs, and suppliers will be on the site each day. Here's how to duplicate what we use.



Display job schedules in a prominent place in the office.

Master Schedule			
Ralph's Plumbing	Tuesday 5/9	Wednesday 5/10	Thursday 5/11
Boyd Electric	Plumbing rough-in	Plumbing rough-in	Roofing installed
ABC HVAC	Roofing installed	Roofing installed	Electrical rough-in
Valley Drywall	Electrical rough-in		
Ace Roofing			
Mike Subs			
Harvey Lumber			
Davidson Concrete			
Painters		Painters	Demolish site
Workers			

Figure 1. On the Master Schedule, each sub, supplier, and trade is highlighted with a different color. This lets you quickly see who is busy on a given day. If their name and color appear on this calendar, you can consult the individual job schedules for the particulars.

Cut and Paste

Start with a large desk calendar (pad type), cut it into strips, and then tape it back together in a single horizontal line. You'll need as many days as your longest wall will hold for the master calendar, and different length calenders for the individual job schedules.

We had a sepia page made with several rows of seven squares labeled Monday through Sunday. With our sepia we can run off as many blue prints as we need to make up our own calendars. It's also great when we have to add a few days to an individual job schedule. For both master and individual calenders you'll also need a good selection of colored highlighting markers (if you use a computer, this system works well with color graphics) to color-code the different subs, suppliers, and in-house trades on your schedules.

Master schedule. This schedule gives you "the big picture." Once your

blank schedule is all taped together, select a color for holidays and weekends, and fill them in.

Now choose a shade for each major trade and each supplier. You'll also need different colors for each of the different types of work to be done by your company employees (painting, carpentry, etc.). Then, choose one last shade to represent all minor subcontractors.

Now add the date to each square in the appropriate day of the week if not already printed there. The remainder of each square will contain the color-highlighted names of all the subs, suppliers, and employee trades scheduled to work any of the jobs that day. I list my subs and deliveries at the top of each square, and the employee tasks near the bottom (see Figure 1).

Individual job schedule. These are similar to the master schedule, except the length of the calendar will vary according to the job.

But before you cut your job calendars to the precise length, let me share a secret with you. Don't schedule anything for Mondays and only plan for half a day on Fridays. Also, add 15 percent of the total working days scheduled (including Mondays and Fridays) to predict a realistic completion date. However, this new completion date is only for you and your client. If your employees and subcontractors know they have extra time, they'll use it. Like the theory about closet space, work expands to fill the time allotted to it.

Now that you've got your horizontal calendar ready with weekends and holidays color-coded, you can start filling it in. In the first square, list the job name, job address, job telephone number, and start date (never the completion date) in bold print as shown in Figure 2. In the next square, list the names and telephone numbers of the subcontractors you'll be using on this

job. In the third square, do the same with all suppliers, and in the fourth and fifth squares list employees for that job. Each sub, supplier and employee trade should be color-coded with the highlighting marker used on the master calendar. At this point, it is not necessary to fill in the calendar dates; in fact, you shouldn't do so until the construction permits are in hand.

Beginning with the sixth square, lay out the job from permit through punch list and final clean up. Remember to consult your master schedule to prevent conflicts. Also, account for religious holidays and vacation days that your clients, key employees, suppliers, and subs will be taking.

Once you're finished with this individual schedule, transfer all sub, supplier, and employee references with their color-coding to the corresponding days on the master schedule (if they are not already listed for another job) to make

Individual Job Schedule				
J.R. Smith 1102 5th Street 404-555-4011	Ralph's Plumbing 555-4341 Boyd Electric 555-4815 ABC HVAC 555-6611 Ace Roofing 555-3650 Black Diamond 555-4611	Harvey Lumber 555-2658 Valley Drywall 555-6922 Davidson Concrete 555-4161	John Jay - Supt. Mike - Carpenter John - Carpenter Greg - Laborer Les - Laborer Will - Laborer	Bill M. - Painter Ron - Painter
May 9				Demolition
start date	subs	suppliers	employees	DAY 1

Monday 5/20	Tuesday 5/21	Wednesday 5/22	Thursday 5/23	
	Plumbing roughed-in	Plumbing roughed-in	Roofing installed	
	Roofing delivered	Roofing installed	Electrical roughed-in	
	Electrical roughed-in	Electrical roughed-in	Drywall delivered	
	Exterior trim installed	Prime exterior trim		
DAY 11	DAY 12	DAY 13	DAY 14	DAY 15
# of days since beginning of job				

Figure 2. The first five squares of an Individual Job Schedule (above) contain all names, phone numbers and employee assignments for that job. Starting with the sixth square, the job is laid out from demolition through cleanup using the same color coding as the master schedule. At the bottom of each square, write the number of days since the beginning of the job. Days 11 through 15 are shown at bottom.

sure it reflects the sum total activity for each day.

Using Your New Tool

Knowing when to start a job is critical. This is where your master schedule again comes into play. By consulting it, you can give realistic starting dates to your prospective customers. I've found over the years that even the most impatient clients are willing to wait, provided you can show them why. I've found this to be a very persuasive tool. Why? Very simple. How many remodeling contractors or subcontractors do you personally know who use a scheduling system? My guess? None.

But this kind of scheduling really shines with subs too, particularly the kind I seem to attract. Although very competent, their own scheduling revolves around the age-old principle that the "squeaky wheel gets the grease." That's why we have developed such a "squeaky" system.

First, one of my job superintendents or I call the subcontractors that will work on a specific job (after a client's contract is signed) and fill them in on our schedule. Often we invite them into our office to go over it and make any needed adjustments. (There shouldn't be too many surprises at this stage though, since we already have asked the subcontractor or supplier

about their current and upcoming workload at the time they submitted their bid.) They are then given a copy of the new job schedule along with an updated master schedule.

But just in case the subs forget, our office manager/secretary calls one week before each sub's arrival or supplier's delivery and then again the morning before. This is a precaution against somebody else's "squeaky wheel" getting their attention.

Simply put, a good scheduling system will shape up even the most disorganized company because it forces you to think ahead instead of reacting to the disasters of the moment. And like using a computer, it becomes so much a part of your routine you can't imagine having done business without it. ■

Larry Bussey has been a remodeling contractor for nearly 20 years. His company, The Larry Bussey Group, now focuses on the purchase and renovation of older properties.