



*The author never leaves his office without his daily planner, which holds all the information he needs to keep track of on-going jobs. His company also uses beepers and two-way radios to communicate between the office and the field.*

# HOW TO MANAGE MORE THAN ONE JOB

One way construction companies grow is by increasing the number of jobs produced at one time. Often, however, the current management — whether it's one person, a partnership, or a team — cannot expand its time or energy effectively to handle fast growth.

When the number of jobs your company takes on increases, so does the number of clients, subs, and employees you have to manage, not to mention the growing stack of paperwork you have to handle. Managing multiple jobs is a juggling act. The effort needed to keep everything going is exhausting, and with each new job you take on, the likelihood of “making a costly mistake” increases dramatically.

## DELEGATION AND STRONG LINES OF COMMUNICATION ARE THE KEYS TO SUCCESS

As production manager for a Maryland remodeling company, I typically have to oversee several projects of varying size and complexity at the same time. In my experience, there is no magic formula for successfully running multiple jobs. But, here are some of the policies and practices that work for me.

### Site Supervision

To run several jobs at once, you need good staff in the field to supervise the work. Whatever title you give these people — lead carpenter, job foreman, site superintendent — they must have the power to make all technical decisions that don't affect design. A lead carpenter should be allowed to alter framing, for example, to accommodate a subcontractor's run of ductwork, but should not change window heights, railing details, and cabinet layout.

Lead carpenters should interact with the client daily to answer questions, to discuss scheduling, and to take care of any discomfort the client may have about the remodeling process. Lead carpenters should also be able to handle

# A FEW GOOD SUPPLIERS

One key to success while running more than one job is to establish a good relationship with a few suppliers. When two or more jobs are going on simultaneously, there is not enough time to research material pricing, availability, and quality. Use one or two suppliers who consistently give you a good product at a good price.

You won't build these relationships overnight. If you are already buying most of your materials from a few suppliers, take a little time to talk with them about a consistent percentage markup that you will be charged. This ensures a fair price with each purchase, and saves you the time and trouble of shopping around. One of our suppliers guaranteed us their low-

est price because of the quantity of materials we buy from them. After years of comparative shopping, I was convinced that they were competitive with others in our area.

**Service counts.** Price isn't everything: Service is an equally important factor to consider when deciding which supplier to use. A supplier who delivers the correct order on time and who goes out of the way to help you when you're in a jam is worth paying a little extra for. In the long run, limiting the number of places you buy from will save money, because you'll spend less time ordering materials, analyzing receipts, and worrying about being overcharged.

— T.F.

change orders, including estimating how much time a change will take, listing the kinds and quantities of the materials needed, and calculating the "aggravation factor" — the amount of time and material that will be consumed indirectly by the change. If the lead carpenter can produce all of this information on site, you will need to make fewer site visits.

Lead carpenters are in the best position to evaluate changes because they're on site all day, but whether they should actually authorize and price changes depends on the capabilities of the individuals and the size of the change. If a lead carpenter has the information needed to calculate a price on the spot, it will save everyone time and money. If the change is large, however, or involves major design alterations, or if the lead carpenter has difficulty talking with the client about money, it pays to have someone else do the pricing and selling of change orders.

**Training.** Where do you find good lead carpenters? While it may seem easiest to hire someone with the proper qualifications, in the long run you're better off training someone yourself. A person who lacks specific skills but is willing to learn can be easier to work with than someone who brings a system of their own to the job.

Training can and should happen in-house. We encourage on-the-job train-

ing by pairing lead carpenters with employees who show an aptitude for taking responsibility. Over the course of one or two jobs, a lead carpenter can instruct these employees in the details of our management system, and gradually delegate some of the responsibility.

We also hold a regular monthly meeting for our production crews to discuss basic site-management issues, such as how to work with clients and subs, and how to handle change orders. The agenda, which is published in advance, usually draws on examples from current or recently completed jobs.

Providing your employees with subscriptions to trade magazines is another good way to keep them up to date on both technical and management issues. Trade groups are also beginning to recognize the need for training and are designing classes for field personnel. The Metropolitan Chapter of the National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI) in Washington, D.C., for example, has developed a seminar specifically for lead carpenters. And the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) has included production-oriented seminars in their Remodelers Show program. Signing your employees up for this kind of training — and footing the bill, including time off from work to attend — is a good way to educate field workers to the complexities of supervisory work.

## Delegate

Even with competent employees in the field, it's difficult to relinquish control. Most contractors put it off until forced to do it, but if you plan ahead, the transition will be smoother. Here are some tips for delegating responsibility.

**Delegate before you have to.** Begin to transfer duties while you have time to monitor how well those around you handle the new responsibilities. If you wait till you're swamped with other problems, you will not be able to keep tabs on progress.

**Delegate only what you are willing to let go of completely.** Decide what you do best, and hang on to that. Some owners, for example, are very good sales people, so they delegate production work. Others are production-minded and would rather someone else did the sales.

**Let go of responsibility to qualified people, then let them do their job.** The biggest mistake is to delegate, then try to dictate. This creates confusion and makes everyone's life miserable.

## Scheduling Personnel

Once you have a lead carpenter in place on each job from beginning to end, your primary personnel decisions involve placing other carpenters and helpers where they're needed. To assign employees effectively, you have to know in advance what the manpower needs of each job will be. There is little you can do if you find out at the end of a day that a carpenter needs a helper at 7:00 a.m. the next day.

To avoid last-minute manpower decisions, our lead carpenters fill out a form each week, requesting personnel for the following week (Figure 1). The form asks for the skill level needed (carpenter, helper, laborer), as well as for a description of the type of work that will be done. I collect the forms on Wednesdays on my usual time-card run, which gives me a couple of days to review the needs of all our jobs before making assignments. I make assignments on Friday so that people know where they'll be working on Monday.

As I review each manpower request, I ask the following questions (not necessarily in this order):

- Is another person really needed on this job?
- Who is available?
- Are the skills of the available people

compatible with the work to be done?

- Does the remaining project budget allow for additional labor costs?
- Before I move a person to another job, is there something at the job they're on that needs to be finished?

The least important factor is budget, although I always try to match the most economical employee to the job. The most important factor is job progress, because a slowdown in one phase of construction affects every subsequent phase. This is especially crucial when subcontractors have been tightly scheduled. I try to avoid shuffling employees back and forth between jobs, partly because it's inefficient for them, and partly because it requires me to make a half dozen phone calls. When help is urgently needed and no one is available, we subcontract to ex-employees who are now working on their own.

Assigning help is a process I don't like to rush. By requiring lead carpenters to fill out a manpower form, I know I will have enough time to decide to put the right people on the right job.

## Keeping Track

As the number of jobs you are running increases, the old means of keeping track don't work as well. Managers of multiple jobs need to rethink the tools they use to communicate information and organize their time.

**Communication.** Being able to communicate quickly and accurately without being on the job site will reduce your growing pains. I regularly use a phone, a cellular phone, a two-way radio, beepers, an answering machine, and a fax machine to stay in touch with carpenters, clients, subs, and suppliers. It's a dazzling array, but each tool makes it possible to deal with job problems almost immediately without having to get in the truck and drive to the site.

Beepers are a great way to contact field personnel, who are not always within earshot of the job phone. They're easy to use — simply call the beeper and tap out your return phone number using the telephone keypad. The person carrying the beeper hears the "beep" and can read the return phone number on the beeper's LCD. (Some types of beepers can broadcast a 10-second voice message.) Beepers save time for the people on both ends of the call. From the office,

**Figure 1.** Lead carpenters use this form each week to request additional workers for their jobs. By comparing the manpower needs of all jobs at the same time, the author can assign the right people to the right job.

**WEEKLY REQUEST FORM**  
JOB SMITH-339  
LEAD CARPENTER JOE SIMMONS DATE 9-7-94

**Subcontractor Schedule**

Subcontractor	Work Required	Date Wanted	Date Sch
1.			
2. <u>Plumber</u>	<u>Rough in</u>	<u>9-10-94</u>	
3.			
4.			
5.			

**Special Order Items**

Item Specs	Date Wanted	Date Sch
1.		
2. <u>Check cabinet delivery date</u>	<u>9-14-94</u>	
4. <u>Please order interior doors</u>	<u>10-4-94</u>	
5.		
6.		

**Information needed**

Please check interior dimension of living room  
Measurements don't add up  
Are we still using hollow core doors or have  
they been changed per our field discussion?

**Personnel needed** 6 workers **When** 9/12-9/16 **Task** Exterior Siding

**Paper Work Needed**

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Time Cards	<input type="checkbox"/> Order Forms	<input type="checkbox"/> Job Logs
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Weekly Request	<input type="checkbox"/> Hours Report	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Budget Report

you can send a message directly to the person you want to talk to, without having to wait for someone to answer the phone or to climb down off the scaffold. Field personnel can return your message when it's convenient for them, reducing the number of interruptions to their work.

Some builders add extra numbers to the end of a beeper message as a code to indicate the urgency of the call. The familiar "911" means "call immediately," for example, a "1" means "call soon," and a "2" means "call when convenient." If you have a large office staff, you can also assign each person a code number so that when a carpenter responds from the field, he or she will know whom to ask for.

A fax machine is another tool to use for quick, accurate communication. With a fax on each job and one in the office, we can send change orders, drawings, and specs back and forth for instantaneous review and decision. Fax machines also help me communicate

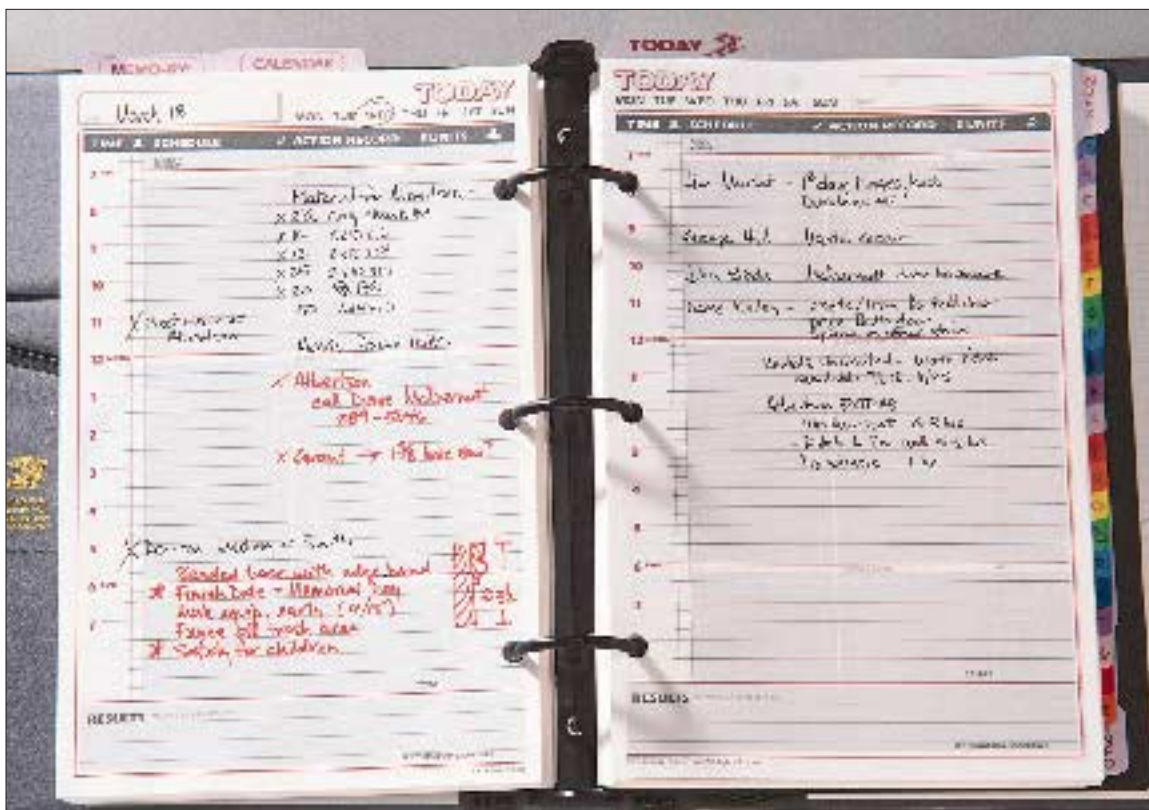
quickly with designers and subs. And it's a lot easier to send an altered construction detail with a faxed drawing than it is to describe the changes over the phone.

Answering machines can be irritating, but they're handy for setting up appointments and leaving simple messages, without having to continually call back. This is especially useful with clients and subs who are never at home.

Our company uses two-way radios as much as any other means of communication. Whenever anyone leaves the office to drive somewhere, they keep the base radio operator informed of their whereabouts. This makes it easy for us to shuffle our schedules when someone cancels out or other problems arise. We also use the two-way to keep track of our dump truck, delivery truck, and one of our handyman trucks. We can call a driver while he's still on the road to change or add to an order, saving a second trip.

I also use a cellular phone to make calls while I commute. It enables me to





**Figure 2.** The author uses a daily planner to keep a to-do list and record important details from conversations throughout the day. (Entries in red ink log calls made after hours.) The notebook also holds copies of contract documents from each of the jobs his company is currently working on.

take care of business I would otherwise have to handle back at the office, or at home at night.

**Getting organized.** Some people can keep track of everything in their head, but once you start to take on more work, there's no substitute for a daily planner. It provides a place to write everything down, and helps you to prioritize your work so that urgent business doesn't always overshadow important routine tasks.

There are many planning systems available commercially, but a homemade version will work just as well. I use a notebook with DayTimer fillers (Figure 2). I keep two months in the book at all times — the current month and the previous month. The filler I use provides two pages for every day of the month — one page for my "to-do" list, and one page to record phone conversations and other important information. In the back half of each notebook, I keep copies of the contracts, estimates, specs, and phone numbers for all of the jobs we are currently working on, separated by tab dividers.

With this system, I can look back as far as a month to check on who said what, or to verify when something was ordered. I always carry my notebook with me while I'm working, so I can handle most situations from either the

office or a job site without having to make a special trip to get the information I need.

I also use a vertical file to store job information near my desk. I keep a folder for each job, containing copies of all job-related information. The vertical file gives me easy access to important details while I'm on the phone, and keeps the folders from piling up.

### Site Guidelines

Finally, it's important to set guidelines for how your job sites will be run. These guidelines will help keep people from making unrealistic demands on your schedule. When you are running more than one job, you will frequently be asked to respond to two demands at one time. Well-defined guidelines will help you and the others involved determine which demand has priority.

Each group of people you deal with — subs, clients, employees, and suppliers — will require a different list. For instance, part of my job is to meet clients on the site to do a walk-through. This meeting can take place any time, but left to the client, it would probably occur during the evening. I avoid having to spend after-hour time with clients by establishing my workday hours in guidelines I provide to our clients.

**Office hours.** It's also important to

establish guidelines for your office hours. You will always have important paperwork to do and a list of calls to make, but problems will arise that require immediate attention. If you let the paperwork go, you will be running behind forever.

Your guidelines should establish a set period of time to do paperwork, make phone calls, order materials, perform job costing, and so on. This could be a few hours each day, or one or two specific times each week. I find that many details require immediate attention early in the day, so my office hours are in the middle of the day. Each lead carpenter knows this because it's written in the guidelines, so they contact me with questions in the morning and leave me alone in the afternoon.

**Phone time.** Employees in the field often need information that is not on the plans or specs. With several jobs going, calls to the office requesting this kind of information will come in piecemeal all day long, disrupting otherwise productive time. To solve this problem, establish a guideline that limits informational calls (except for emergencies) to one each day at a set time. ■

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