

Scheduling Simplicity

by Richard Lind



Do you really know the stage your job should have reached on each day of the month? Many small contractors and construction companies amble along from day to day without any planned or prepared schedule of work progress for the weeks ahead.

The end goal is generally pretty clear: completing the house, job, or contract. What often is lacking, however, is a plan or a roadmap to get from here to there.

An amazingly simple and surprisingly effective tool to help is a desktop "month-at-a-glance" calendar. The desktop calendar enables you to see at a glance when making plans, talking on the phone, or organizing bills for payment, how far along your jobs should be on a given date. It alerts you to make whatever calls you must to assure that work gets done when it has to.

You'll need the kind with squares big enough to pencil in the stage that your jobs should reach on any specific day. Of course, realistic scheduling is the key to the greatest effectiveness. Perhaps the only good that resulted from the recent industry slowdown is a more civilized atmosphere out in the field that makes scheduling considerably easier and more reliable than during the frenzy of the mid-1980s.

A visual aid is something tangible. In this case, it's a plan that, among other things, develops a psychological urgency to meet the schedule. It serves as an incentive to expedite the job. Maybe that means placing orders where lead time is involved, or lining up subs for a mechanical installation. Perhaps you'll just want to remind yourself to push or prod wherever needed to meet schedule. There is always a sense of satisfaction that results from meeting a commitment we have established for ourselves, and the job moves along at a lively pace in the process.

A Good Business Planner

The month-at-a-glance calendar, in addition to scheduling work in progress, makes a good overall business planner. It helps you budget your money as well as your time. A properly prepared work schedule laid out on the desk is an excellent tool for managing cash flow. During construction, income normally flows in spurts from construction loans paid out by the lender according to a predetermined schedule. With contract work, the payments are made according to a schedule of finished work. Since bills generally come in fairly predictably, construction progress can be scheduled so that income coincides with expenses. Such a schedule allows the time to get that loan payment or customer's check in hand, deposited in your account, and cleared. Once all that is done, you can start drawing on it to meet the next raft of bills and take advantage of hefty discounts.

It's good business to be aware of the dates on which orders for stock might be placed, as they relate to regular



billing dates. For example, toward the end of the month, it often makes sense to defer ordering until the first day of the next month (assuming the delay doesn't compromise your schedule). That allows you to skate for 30 days before the bill comes in, and it gives you another 10 days to pay and still take a discount. Some builders have a standing agreement with their suppliers that any orders placed after the 25th day of the month (or some other agreed-upon date) automatically are placed on the books as if ordered on the first day of the next month. Good cash-flow management means more than making ends meet and just getting the bills paid on time. It's the ability to position yourself to withstand economic potholes with some staying power. It is the key to sustained business growth. Good cash-flow management is the mark of a survivor.

If you ever need to document activity in a dispute with the IRS, a customer, or a sub, you'll rely heavily on your records. The calendar may help you support your position. While it may not reveal every small detail, it can help jog your memory.

Remain Flexible

Even the very best-planned schedules should not be so inflexible that changes can't be made to accommodate unforeseen circumstances. Review schedules frequently and don't hesitate to make mid-course corrections, if necessary, to get things back on track. A good business manager always will have some contingency plans or a fall-back position on which to rely.

As with so many things in life, you can get as much out of this visual aid as you want. The calendar can serve not only as a work schedule for jobs in

progress, and an aid to cash-flow management, but also as a pretty good journal of business activity. How many times have you needed to latch on to the facts of a particular situation months after the job is seemingly settled? If you ever need information to document activity for, say, a dispute with the Internal Revenue Service, a local board, a customer, or a subcontractor, you'll rely heavily on your records. The calendar may help you explain or support your position. While it may not reveal every small detail, it can help jog your memory.

Along similar lines, it's an excellent practice to log all significant telephone calls. You don't have to record your life's history, just the pertinent facts and gist of the conversation. Being able to rattle off names of the parties spoken to and the time and date of the call lends credibility to your position. The log takes little effort, just a bit of discipline. After a while, a habit and a style develop for noting the information in seconds.

In my mind, a flawed plan is better than no plan. This simple visual aid to plan and schedule work, while no perfect, is easy to use and is priced right. You won't be a slave to the preparation. Any tool, of course, is useful only if it helps. The month-at-a-glance calendar is one that can help you run your business and not let your business run you. ■

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