A More Efficient Jobsite

For a lone wolf contractor, doggedly seeking out wasted motion is a profit center

by Mark Clement

I might be a little off the deep end when it comes to an "efficient" jobsite, but over the course of a career spent refining tool and material layout, I've found that almost all of my attempts at avoiding wasted motion have paid off. There are many ways to define wasted motion, but one example that immediately comes to mind is driving to the big box store because I can't find X or Y. So is stumbling over materials or trash left on the cut bench or floor. So, from the truck I choose to drive to the carts I use to move material around, I try to keep the chaos to a minimum and the production as productive as I can make it.

Before I go any further, I think it's important to note that "efficiency" isn't a "thing" as much as it is a decision. It requires a little self-reflection and a step back to examine where there might be bottlenecks in your process, and then a dogged pursuit to ferret them out, oil them up, and make the entire machine that is you—the lone wolf—run a little smoother and make a little more money with a little less frustration.

What Is Efficiency?

Like a choice in toolbelts or the dump truck vs. dump trailer debate, it's not a one-size-fits-all answer. Rather, the pursuit of efficiency involves finding a balance that works for your situation.

For example, if you told me to reorganize my stuff in a click-together storage box system, I couldn't do it. My mind doesn't work that way. I might not lose stuff, but without seeing it all the time, I'd never be able to find it either. And if I have to open 25 lids to find a drill bit—well, forget about it. On the other hand, to see me lose my mind, show me a jobsite with half-open cabinet boxes strewn about, or a tipped-over pile of lumber, or a trillion cutoffs on the floor. And if you have to walk somewhere other than where you're standing to get your tape

PHOTOS BY MARK CLEMENT

measure or a pencil because you "don't like" toolbelts ... well ... somebody call the National Guard.

So, this article isn't necessarily 10 Tips to Get You Better Organized. It's about categories and clusters of jobsite realities we all face where it matters to be dedicated to taming chaos and wasted time at the source.

It Starts in the Truck

It only took me about 20 years to figure this out, but I had been using the wrong (for me) truck the entire time. Working on a TV show, where the production company gave us a 24-foot box truck to cart my shop around, made me realize that a pickup truck isn't necessarily the best option for a contractor. And while that box truck is obviously nowhere near as practical in real life, it saved so much time setting up and breaking down, I thought it would build the shows for us.

While my current dream mobile would be a stepvan I can outfit myself, I stumbled into a used service-body truck that instantly went to work paying for itself by saving me an hour a day toting tools, rummaging through truck boxes, or hauling my miter saw out of a truck bed or back seat. Or worrying about rain. It's a shed on wheels.

Also, because there is only one of me, my tools are now with me almost 90% of the time. If I were using an enclosed trailer and didn't tow it home all the time, doing a quick service call—even fixing something at my house—after working on a larger project would be out of the question. Or, I would have to go back for the trailer. There's only one of me, and I need what I need when I need it.

Materials Placement & Storage

I'm rabid about setting up my jobsites in a linear fashion so I can get to what I need as I need it. Where possible, I try to break the components out in related clusters of stuff rather than just going for the stuff I need first, then piling other stuff on top of other stuff. Kind of like a buffet, but heavier. Also, it's sometimes handy to have a few hunks of 2-by ahead of time for dunnage.

Figure 1. The ability to roll a stack of lumber around instead of moving it board by board contributes to efficiency (A). Placing a trash can to collect offcuts saves the time and energy needed to pick them up off the ground (B).

A recent shed build is a good example. My yard delivered the cube packed for shipping, not for how I'd use the building materials in it, so—like all deliveries—everything was tangled up. As I broke the cube down, I staged the customer's yard in clusters—joists, sheeting, studs, and so on—in a line. If instead I told a laborer to unpack the materials, the chances somebody would be moving that pile more than once would go up about 1,000%.

Carts. I don't make any money moving stuff around. I make it installing stuff. One question I often ask myself is, "Will I have to move this twice if I put it here versus over there?" On basement remodels, the answer is almost inevitable: Yes, because if you put the studs and plates in the middle of the room, and the tile in the corner for later, where will you cut? Or where will the plumber put his stuff? Can the electrician reach the panel?

To make moving materials around

easier, I make simple dollies using 2x4 lumber and 4-inch rolling/locking casters. Two will carry a mountain of studs, while one can carry a landslide of tile boxes. I've even put a site-built miter saw station on them and towed it around the room because cutting standing up is much easier than wrestling with a circular saw while hunched over and cutting on the floor, and faster than walking back and forth to sawhorses a million times. If something is in the way, the dollies allow me to roll it so that it is *not* in the way.

Mud. Deck builders often build in mud, which is slippery and sticky. Mud is a chafe that makes me inefficient, because simply trying not to fall down takes up bandwidth I need for solving other problems. To hedge my bets on this unavoidable jobsite condition, I tarp the site (lumberyard plastic is awesome—and awesomely free) before rain is expected. If the post holes are dug, I shovel any extra dirt my auger brings up away from the holes, then I bridge them with something (paver stones, plywood, or the like) so that the tarp won't fill too much in those areas. Attaching the plastic to the ledger creates a drain plane of sorts.

Delivery day. I tend to do a number of different types of jobs. For example, I recently cleared brush for a new fence install, so I needed my chain saws and related gear. The next day, I might need to load up my trailer with my subcompact loader and small cultivator, which I use for decks. Sometimes, material that I use for decks gets shipped to my house instead of the jobsite, and often I have leftover supplies from one job that I can use on the next. Before long, my truck looks like somebody tipped over a big box store inside of it. That is not efficient. That is a disaster.

When this happens, I try to go on a delivery binge and get everything that's snarled in the back of my truck where it needs to go. It is hard sometimes, because all my momentum is pushing toward finishing this or starting that, but this delivery time is time that is well spent.

Figure 2. Horizontal surfaces invite being loaded up with random stuff, but a site-built miter saw stand can also double as a valuable work table (A). Even if not needed for working at height, a rolling scaffold offers a convenient spot for storing fasteners and other small items, and it can be rolled to where those items are needed (B).

Tables & Trash Cans

Jobsite reality: Any and all horizontal surfaces will be immediately festooned with stuff there's no place for, such as keys, coffee cups, phones, chargers, paperwork, and breakfast sandwich boxes. So the first thing I set up on a jobsite is a portable table. I happen to like the OmniTable, but a small, portable, folding-leg table that's easy to move around is the basic idea. Onto this table goes all the stuff there's no place for, because now there's a place, which helps keep actual work surfaces clear.

The second thing I set up is a trash can, which gives me a place to dispose of the packaging after I take the last bite of the

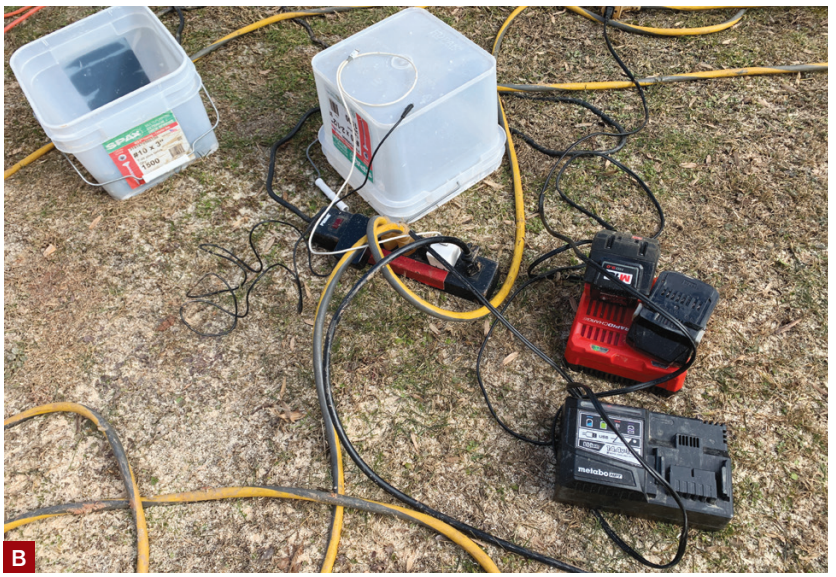

Figure 3. For his most frequently used tools, the author prefers a large trilevel storage box with a bin for power tools, trays for hand tools, and wheels (A). Storing items by categories, such as cords, chargers, and batteries, and storing them in bins makes it easier to track an item down.

sandwich or unwrap some door hardware. The other thing I do with the trash can—which usually lives at the end of my cut bench; more on that in a second—is put a bunch of bags in the bottom of it, then wrestle a bag around the rim. After the first bag is full and I remove it, I have to spend zero seconds wondering where the spare bags are. Grab and go.

I know a lot of lone wolves like foldable, collapsible miter saw stands, but I'm not one of them. For all the efficiency they offer in the form of compact storage and roll-away transport, most offer stock support but no work surface. So I make my own miter saw tables, and while I've gone through a zillion designs (the current one is made from strapping and cost about 99 cents), what they all have in common is continuous infeed/outfeed. So when I'm installing crown, I can screw a cleat to the table top (because there is one) and cut material nested. I can hang my coping saw off a screw in the side along with the clamps I use to hold the piece in place while I cope. I also use the table's edge to measure to short points. I just align the edge of the table with the short point, then hook the table and measure. Everything I cut off immediately gets thrown in the trash can that is placed right there.

Tools and Boxes

I try to cluster my tools into categories: Trim stuff, paint stuff, deck stuff, fasteners, drill bits, and so on. I also try to cluster them in boxes that help me further separate the related parts. This isn't possible with open toolbox-type boxes without modifying them, and the last thing I want to spend my weekends doing is making boxes to fit in my boxes. So I try to buy boxes that do this for me.

A good example is my Craftsman trilevel toolbox. I can keep most of the everyday-carry deck stuff in one and roll it to where it needs to go in one move, not 35. I take the same approach with my service body truck. All the pneumatic stuff goes in one bin; all the clean-up stuff and the small vac goes in another; cordless tools, batteries, and chargers go in a third bin. The benchtop tools go in the main body of the van, and they're a mess, to be honest, but it works.

For hand tools, I've found hardly anything more to my liking than a simple riggers' bag. The one I got from Duluth Trading Company a lifetime ago carries what I need carried and stores it vertically in a slot so I can see it. On the other hand, a typical toolbox filled with wrenches, side cutters, and my wire stripper and other tools is really just a pile with sides. If I am sorting through many things to find one thing, that's a waste of time and motion. That's how you lose something. It's inefficient. ❖

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