

Behind Schedule? Try Another Approach

by Morris D. Carey, Jr.

A general contractor friend of mine has harped on me for years about the importance of job scheduling. "Schedule is everything," he'd say. He insisted that an otherwise profitable subdivision could prove to be a disaster if the schedule was lost. I had trouble with his philosophy. I wasn't building subdivisions. I was doing room additions and remodels, the kind of work that's over almost as quickly as it begins.

The Importance of Sharing

Time has proved my friend right. Until about a year ago we employed a superintendent whose job was to schedule our in-house crew and our subcontractors. He was required to maintain a written calendar of events and organize work for each job by that schedule. Jobs weren't coming in on time, customers were angry, profits continued to drop, the crew was confused, and our subs were pulling their hair out trying to keep up their end of the bargain. I began to feel that our super didn't know how to create a schedule.

But I was wrong. He did know how to schedule. The problem was he didn't know how to share his schedule with others - important others like the crew and the subs who were ultimately responsible to perform the work. No one in the field knew any more than what the superintendent laid out for a given day or week. No one knew the total scope of the job, or who was responsible for what.

Today, no job begins in our company without a schedule. And everyone involved gets a copy: the plumber, electrician, sheetmetal contractor, crew, salesperson, customer, even the accounting department. Now that everyone knows what's planned, it happens, and it happens on time.

The moral of this story is simple: A schedule works if it is realistically created, but most importantly, if everyone involved with it gets a copy. The results are astounding. Our referral business is up as a result of a happier clientele, our crew and our

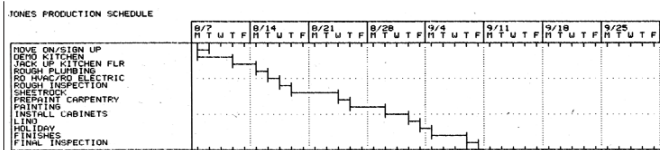


Figure 1. Most computerized scheduling programs print out a time line, or "Gantt chart," like the one at left, for a single job or several concurrent jobs.

subs are able to plan earlier, and our jobs have become easier to manage -- and that makes them more profitable.

Like other business functions, scheduling can be done manually or on a computer. With the right software, the computer can make it a lot more efficient. Computerized scheduling programs abound - they're everywhere. Here are just a few I have studied: there's Project Scheduler 2000 (Scitor, Sunnyvale, Calif.), Schedule Manager (CMS, San Diego, Calif.), and Quick Schedule Plus (Power Up Software, San Mateo, Calif.). Each of these programs will print a Gantt (horizontal line) presentation for a single job or combination of jobs (see Figure 1).

A Simple Calendar

The program I use to keep my jobs on track isn't classified as a scheduler at all, but really does the trick for me. It's called Calendar Creator Plus (CCP), and is offered by Power Up Software. It's available for an easy-to-swallow \$59.95.

CCP is nothing more than a simple calendar maker. The program comes with a holiday schedule, which is simple to alter, and helps to prevent scheduling conflicts.

First, I use the program to print a blank calendar (with holiday schedule) covering the general period of time the job is expected to take (see Figure 2). This is a real plus, because the calendar I create can be made to begin on the same week the job starts and can include a weekdays-only (five-day) presentation, or a seven-day presentation with weekends included. I select the seven-day presentation to flag work that our customers elect to do. This helps our subs and crew to be

aware of customer participation, and forces our customers to plan for what they are responsible to perform.

Next, I handwrite my schedule onto the blank form making changes as I go. And finally, I enter the handwritten data into the computer. It's quick and easy.

CCP works on about a dozen popular brands of printers and allows the user to create calendars covering different periods of time, such as one year, six months, or three months. It also prints calendars in six-week, one-month, three-week, two-week, one-week, and either one- or two-day formats. Each calendar can be given a title (for example, Jones Production Schedule), or the same calendar can be printed with different titles. This is nice if your type of construction includes a lot of repeat work with only minor modifications. Events can be entered into the program by a given date or as floating events. Floating events are ones that repeat such as the second Tuesday of every month, or every Friday, or the fifth of December every year.

Data is easy to enter or change, but, unfortunately, items of work cannot be moved forward or backward in time when you need to change the schedule due to other events. I have discussed this aspect of the program with the folks at Power Up Software, and it doesn't look like they intend to make any changes. I'll keep trying.

My big attraction to the program is simple: When it's finished it looks like a calendar. And everyone can read a calendar. It doesn't offend anyone or insult their intelligence. Just a plain old calendar. I use this system to juggle up to 15 jobs at the same time, using a separate calendar for each job.

Don't get me wrong. I feel that scheduling programs are extremely important to our industry, and that programs that create non-calendar-looking presentations such as Gantt and CPM make good sense. I especially like those that I mentioned earlier in this article. Although their place has always been on the wall in the production office and in the job shack, improved sophistication will probably bring them into the custom-home and home-improvement market someday as well. Who knows? Maybe I'll be able to talk one of them into producing a calendar presentation.

Your Questions

Q. Please provide me with information concerning computers in construction. I am interested in what software and equipment (hardware) to buy especially for excavation and road work.

— James Rayford, Raleigh, N.C.

A. No matter what, James, if you get into computing in your business, a word-processor program like WordStar, or Microsoft Word would do much to enhance general correspondence. Beyond that you might want to look at what the folks who put out Master Builder have to offer. Their accounting and estimating programs were written much in part to support contractors like yourself whose business is heavy - no pun intended. The software is reasonably priced and relatively easy to learn to use. Contact them at Omware, 632 Petaluma Ave., Sebastapol, CA 95472;

Q. I'm just getting started in the construction business, and would like to take advantage of my Apple Macintosh computer. Would you be so kind as to help me get started and please tell me what software to buy.

— Peter Imbesi, Glen Head, N.Y.

A. It may sound silly, Peter, but you might want to start with a simple game or a typing tutor program that will help you become familiar with the keyboard. Next step would be — as I mentioned above — get a word processor. Word processors are super easy to learn to use and will help you to become more familiar with the computer as a whole. Additionally, results generated by a word processor can be seen on screen, and then printed quickly and easily. As Albert Einstein once said, "People love chopping wood. In this activity one immediately sees results."

Since you have a Mac you may want to look into MacNail 2.2 by Turtle Creek Software. MacNail is an estimating and job-cost accounting program. It is a spreadsheet based program, and although I don't personally favor that kind, it really is about all that is currently available for your hardware. For information, write Turtle Creek Software, 651 Halsey Valley Road, Spencer, NY 14883; 607/589-6858.

Next month, a look at the least expensive estimating program in America — and more letters from you. ■

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Figure 2. The first step with Calendar Creator Plus is to print out a blank calendar, with holidays, for the general period of the job (left). Next, pencil in your schedule onto the blank form (middle). Finally, key in the data and hand out copies (right) to everyone involved with the job.