CONSTRUCTION CONNECTION

Don't Let Delays Derail Your Construction Project
Five common reasons for project delays-and how to prevent them

[By Dean Bennett]

According to the Construction Industry Institute's "Assessment of Owner Project Management Practices and Performance" survey, about one out of every three projects is over budget or behind schedule. Construction projects of all kinds-from smaller remodeling to major new building, residential or commercial-are notorious for delays. Against these odds, how can you make your project a success-not a statistic?

Some delays are inevitable, but increased understanding of external factors, attention to detail, and proactive communication on your part can help manage costs and keep the project moving forward. In construction, time truly is money. For the client, it may mean a homeowner who faces extra rent costs until he or she can get into a new home or a retailer who can't open during a busy season. For the contractor, delays often bring work stoppages and further delays in starting other projects.

Learning how to aggressively plan for and manage delays can mean the difference between profit and loss, between success and failure. Here are five of the most common reasons for project delays and the steps you can take to prevent them:

1. **Inspections**-The source of many headaches for contractors, inspections require careful planning and time budgeting. Calling for them before the project is ready, calling for them too late, or failing them can all cause delays.

   Prevention
   You need to be able to tell when a job is truly ready for inspection. Acquiring at least a working knowledge of as many skills on the job as possible will serve you well. In addition, spend time with subcontractors to understand more of what they do. Remember that failure of an inspection may not only require more of your time but may also necessitate a subcontractor returning.

   You'll also need knowledge of how inspections work in the area of your project; systems differ from city to city and suburb to suburb. In one locale, one inspector may arrive to conduct four inspections at once. Another city may require six inspections-some of which may depend on passing others-by six different people on six different days.

2. **Subcontractor delays**-While a general contractor has only a few projects in progress at a time, a subcontractor usually has many at a time. A delay in any one of those will likely cause a delay in your job. The priority of your project may be lower with a given subcontractor because he or she has a number of active projects-some of which may be larger and more financially lucrative than yours.

   Prevention
   Contractors need some clout or leverage with subcontractors. With a general contractor, that leverage is future work. For individuals serving as their own general contractors, that leverage will need to be financial.

   Penalties for not starting on time can help, but few subcontractors will agree to contracts with such clauses. You will have better success by getting to know your subcontractors, understanding what they do, and communicating frequently and clearly with them about deadlines.

3. **Delays in shipping times-**If the windows you ordered right on schedule don't arrive on time because of unforeseen problems at the supplier's warehouse, you can't keep the house dry when it rains, and the electricians can't start on time. Sound familiar? Windows, cabinets, appliances, and special-order items are common sources of delays. A late shipment of even one item can throw off subcontractors' schedules.

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Prevention
Steer clients toward in-stock items whenever possible, or use suppliers that maintain larger local stocks of needed items. Otherwise, double the estimated shipping time for your planning purposes. If a client decides to order something on his or her own, specify exact dates-with a buffer-for when you will need the items.

4. **Client change of mind**-Every contractor knows that once a project begins to take shape, the client can visualize better and will request changes. And, given that the client is the (paying) client, he or she can make changes-if he or she understands the consequences.

Prevention
Detailed, proactive communication with clients before a project begins can set the stage. While you can't anticipate every client request, you can outline some specific examples so that they understand the time and cost consequences of changes. Clients may not realize that a seemingly simple request, for example, could require a change in design, reengineering, re-filings with the municipality, and reordering of materials.

Also, explain the "chain effect" of changes to clients, with examples. Moving a wall, door, or window just a few inches also could mean that you need to call back a plumbing or electrical subcontractor and need to work with their schedules.

Be sure to work with a designer-a good one who understands construction-and make sure that both you and the designer have thought through the project clearly before beginning. Then, firmly agree on the design with your client at the start, with a written sign-off. You may not eliminate change requests, but you'll have set up a clear system for handling them.

5. **Weather**-Meteorologists have a hard enough time predicting tomorrow's weather. So how, you say, can you anticipate and account for weather problems in your project? One standard key is always to build some degree of extra time into your project timeline. How much and where in the schedule you build this in depends on the nature of your project and the area of the country in which you are working.

Prevention
If your project is primarily indoors, the added time may be minimal-but not zero. Keep in mind that you may be dependent on materials shipping from other parts of the country that could be adversely affected by weather. Also, remember that while you may be working comfortably inside, you-and your team-must get to and from the job site. Should snow, rain, storms, or other factors come into play, it is likely you will lose some time.

In your project timeline, you'll need to remember the types of weather delays that can affect various parts of your project. For instance, frost can be a cause of delay in pouring concrete. If you can adjust your schedule to pour concrete in a warm season, you can avoid this possibility. Otherwise, you'll need to build in extra time for this task. Contractors in the Southwest United States can generally count on low humidity and plan painting accordingly; those in the South will need to factor in extra time.

For major outdoor work in many areas of the country affected by severe winters, super-structures to cover your work may make sense. Since they are expensive, you'll need to do careful cost-benefit analyses to determine your savings.

The bottom line is to plan and account for the unexpected. When forecasters say there is no chance of rain, and you don't have a roof on your project, know that it *will* rain, and you will need to allocate time for clean up. Become a good time manager and account for possible delays in your schedule. And if things go more smoothly than you anticipate, you-and your client-will be ahead.

About the Author:

Dean Bennett is president of Dean Bennett Design and Construction, Inc., a design/build firm based in Castle Rock, CO, that specializes in custom residential design and construction; projects include remodeling, interior and exterior additions, conversions, basement finishes, landscaping and fencing, and custom-finish carpentry.

The company offers concept-to-completion design, including working drawings, blueprints, securing of permits, and inspection coordination. Working with a business model of a single principal on-site throughout the project, from architectural design through final construction, Bennett effectively integrates design and construction while eliminating the need to

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hire separate general and sub-contractors and architects.

Bennett has worked with a national client base, which spans multiple years, since 1996. He holds a master's degree in architecture and a bachelor's degree in environmental design from the University of Colorado. Bennett is an accomplished fly fisherman, golfer, skier, and snowboarder, and enjoys swimming, running, cycling, cooking, and photography.

He can be reached at (303) 513-2065 or at dean@deanbennettdc.com.