



# NAHB Building Business Briefs

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## Tech Talk: Improving Scheduling and Cycle Time

By Bill Allen

*(This is the seventh article in the nine-part Tech Talk series.)* Some of the best scheduling systems I've seen are the result of an amazing product called "intuition." Unfortunately, intuition doesn't communicate well and it's all but impossible to duplicate. After all, we all have our own "intuitive" ways of getting things done.

Early scheduling systems were adapted from the commercial construction and manufacturing industries. They gave home builders tools for tracking construction progress, but they seldom interfaced with other dependent processes such as sales, purchasing, and contract administration.

Now we are progressing with software technology that incorporates builders', suppliers', and trade contractors' "real-time" schedules. Many of the new products work wonders with vendor communication. But the true essence of scheduling concerns how the project affects the customer and vice versa.

The previous Tech Talk article emphasized the need to integrate the customer's process and the construction process. Continuing with that concept, let's examine the construction side of scheduling technology.

If you ran a plant, it would be much easier to anticipate workloads, resource and labor availability problems, and resulting delays. In the home building industry, each jobsite is a "plant." Luckily, there's technology available you can use on site to make it easier to set up jobs and track them. The first scheduling applications for handheld devices worked with Windows CE™ and were cumbersome to upload. Bless Palm, Inc., for making the upload process "generic." This has allowed several software developers to write scheduling applications that are familiar to "mainstream" users, including construction managers.

As I've stressed throughout the Tech Talk series, you need to perfect your systems and processes (or at least figure them out on paper) before you can make the best use of technology. Here are some tips to improve your job scheduling efficiency and get cycle time under control:

**Standardize your schedule.** The length may vary, but the sequence of critical construction

events should not. Write down the sequence (as well as the order of tasks associated with each event) and stick to it on every job. This step is absolutely essential for automating the scheduling process and integrating it with your company's other functions and processes and the customer's process.

**Communicate schedule variances to affected parties** such as suppliers, trade contractors, inspectors, and the customer, if necessary. An automated scheduling system can link the schedule with a database of trade contractors and suppliers contracted to work on the job and recalculate dates so you can reconfirm who will do what and when. Keep in mind that the accuracy of such a system depends on keeping the data up to date.

**Give it time.** Standardizing your schedule often represents a very important cultural change for your company. Daily scheduling accountability does not happen overnight. Explain the scheduling process to your field and office employees as well your trade contractors and suppliers. If you automate your scheduling system, make sure everyone who works with it receives training on how to use the software and how it integrates with other functions in your company. Give everyone time to get used to the new system.

**Don't just focus on sticks and bricks.** Traditional schedules tend to focus on critical construction steps. If you track and improve your "permitting and pre-start" phase, chances are excellent you can recover days of cycle time here as well as during the active construction cycle.

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