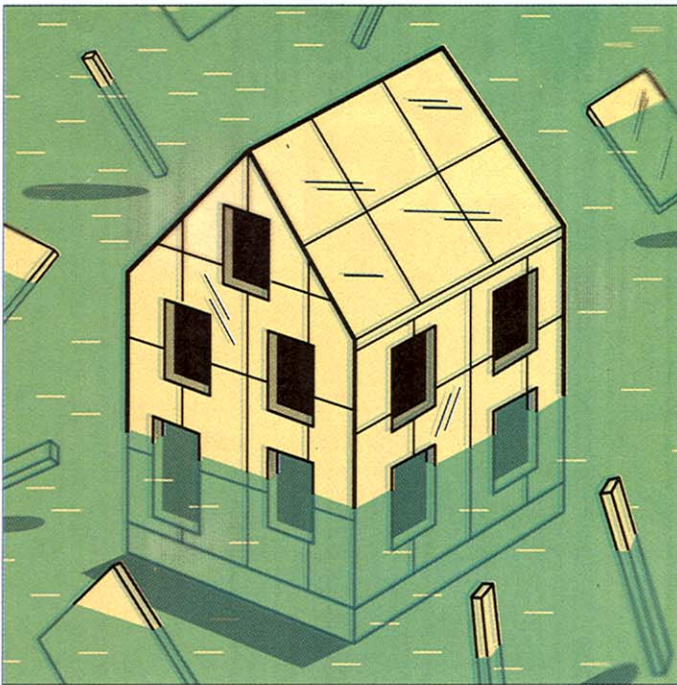


Schedules Happen

Staying on track
when the unexpected
is the norm

BY ALICE BUMGARNER



In a perfect world, the weather would be clear and sunny 24/7. Subcontractors would be as dependable as Swiss trains. And creating foolproof schedules would be a cinch.

In the real world, unexpected snags and the ensuing delays are the nature of the business. What happens to that disciplined road map — your schedule — when it rains for a week, or the custom door arrives three months late, or subcontractors fail to deliver?

Here's a look at the scheduling strategies that three remodelers use to keep their projects on track.

MICHELLE MYERS

*M Squared Builders & Designers
Bahama, N.C.*

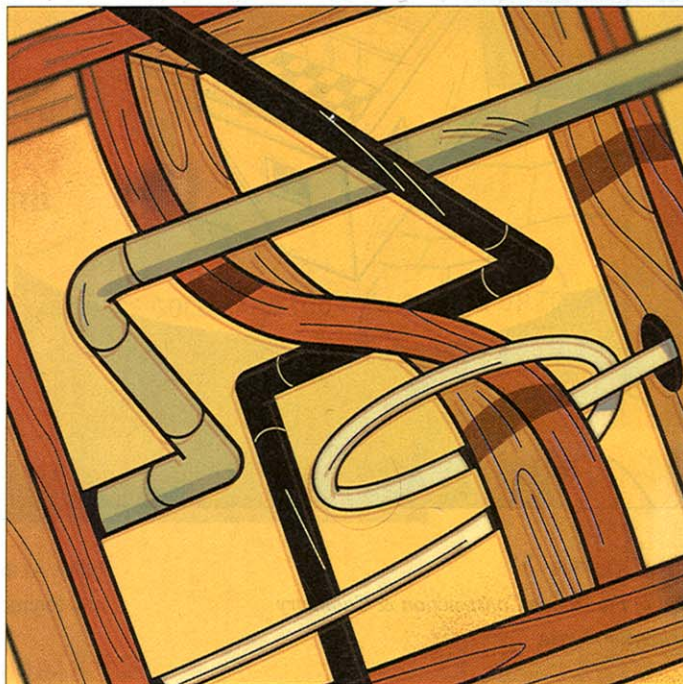
In a previous life, Michelle Myers created schedules for the Marine Corps. She worked on massive projects, such as the step-by-step construction of aircraft, and used the Gantt chart, a well-known project-planning tool that reveals at a glance whether tasks are on schedule. One schedule was so painfully detailed that it blanketed the walls of a building the length of a football field. In spiderweb fashion, best- and worst-case scenarios sprang from each point.

These days, as owner of M Squared Builders & Designers, Myers still uses the Gantt chart as a critical management tool. But even the best-laid plans can go awry, she admits. "Most of the time your day goes to hell in a handbasket," Myers says. "So you're constantly readjusting."

In her view, the unexpected is the norm. Being willing to change a schedule is what keeps her afloat when things get rocky. Flexibility "can make or break the project for you, in the eyes of the client," she says.

Coming up with a detailed plan in the first place is essential. "There are certain things that are critical path," Myers says, that is, tasks that must happen at a certain time and in a certain order, such as installing the countertop before the faucet or the gas line before the stove. All other tasks are "floating," and Myers readjusts these as needed, should bad weather strike or a product be delayed. "You call in your backup, call in your trade, so you can still be hitting that end goal."

The schedules Myers creates track all important aspects of a project, rather than scheduled work alone. "If I have a special-order door, for example, I put the order date on the schedule," Myers says. "You shouldn't have to think in the middle of the project, 'What's the lead time on



Some tasks are critical-path, says Michelle Myers, but all others are floating, and should be readjusted as needed.

that door? When do I need to order it?' You've got too much going on for that. You just want to execute."

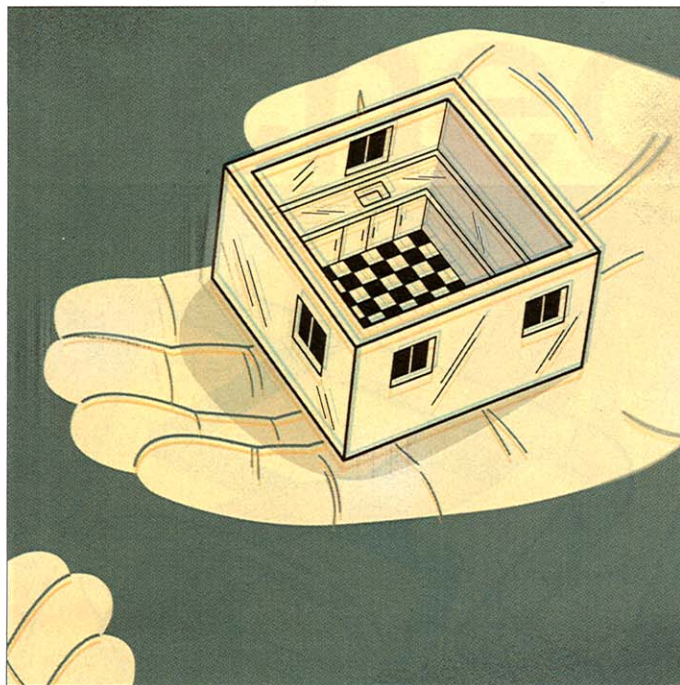
Myers learned one of her best scheduling tips the hard way. She had agreed to use a Canadian kitchen cabinet manufacturer she had never worked with before. The company read the drawings incorrectly, inverting everything from top to bottom. Among the results of this mishap was that the space for the built-in microwave was so low a three-year-old could reach it. And not only did Myers have to pay to ship the cabinets back to Canada, but it was a full year after the rest of the project was completed before Myers resolved the problem.

"That's a lesson learned," Myers notes. "I have to ask far more questions. I hadn't worked out all the details with them in advance, and I didn't even know that I needed to."

She's particularly attentive to special-order items. "Know the vendor, find out the procedures, know their lead times, know what they're going to do when they make a mistake," she says. "Because if they do make a mistake, that can really wreak havoc on your schedule."

Schedules Happen

Bill Smith builds clients' confidence by presenting them with an honest, realistic schedule.



BILL SMITH

*Out of the Woods Construction & Cabinetry
Arlington, Mass.*

Confidence is contagious, said legendary football coach Vince Lombardi. Bill Smith couldn't agree more. Production manager of Out of the Woods Construction & Cabinetry, Smith believes that the best way to create confident clients is to present them with an honest, realistic schedule.

Why does it matter if your clients are confident? Because, Smith says, the more confident they are in their decisions, the more likely they are to make decisions on time — and your project will go according to plan.

Key to Smith's strategy is not overwhelming clients with decisions. "Some production managers bring a laundry list of things for the client to decide," he says. "Even two decisions in one day may be a lot." His approach is to spread out "decision days" — days on which he'll meet with the client to discuss any critical decision, from bathroom configuration to lighting style.

Smith regularly reminds clients of impending decisions. For example, if a client doesn't know what's beneath that old linoleum, he'll plug in a decision day after demolition to review the situation. In the weeks leading up, he sends the clients flooring samples to review and invites

them to consider all the options. "Whatever needs to be done for them to make a good decision," he says.

"Probably the most important thing in project management is being open, upfront, and honest," Smith says. No surprises. "That builds confidence, and that's the most important thing — to win clients' confidence. If you can't keep it going when the house is torn apart, you're sunk."

Smith also strives to get buy-in from subcontractors and the lead carpenter before finalizing a schedule. He first invites subs to the jobsite, asking them to estimate how much time they'll need for their work. He then invites the lead carpenter to review the proposed schedule and to suggest any changes.

Odds are, once demolition starts, Smith's schedule isn't going to change dramatically. "We all put the schedule together, from the day the client comes over to the last dustpan being filled," he says. "It's a sense of shared responsibility.

At the end of the day, we all know the schedule is first and foremost."

SHARON RAINEY

*Home Equity Builders
Great Falls, Va.*

Sharon Rainey lives in fear of a phone call — one in which she has to tell a client that she's not going to finish their job on schedule.

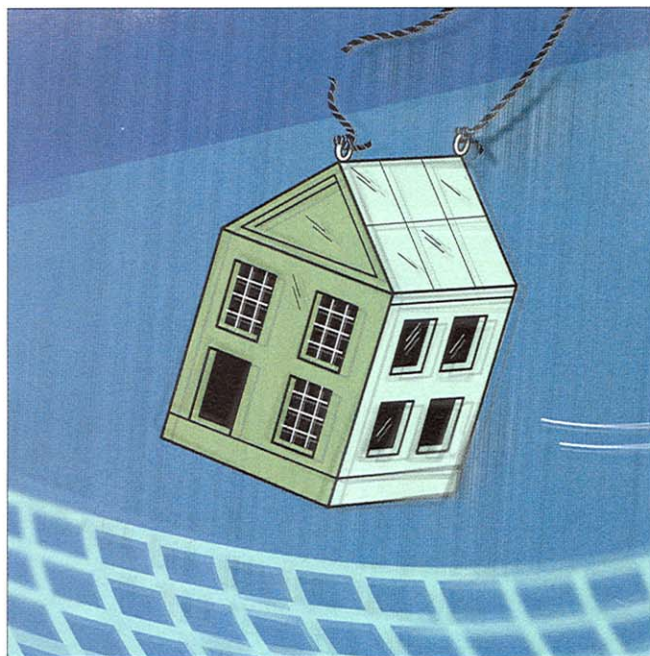
"I never want to make that call," says Rainey, vice president of Home Equity Builders. And she almost never does, because of a simple method: she pads. Specifically, she pads the time she would normally allot for her company's handyman division. If a handyman job typically takes two hours, she gives it a half day. A job that should take three days gets four days on the schedule.

As it happens, her two handymen usually finish their jobs early, a fact that helps her keep the company humming in either of two ways.

One, if a larger remodeling job is behind schedule, Rainey can reassign a handyman to get it back on track. Two, if her handymen aren't needed for a remodeling job, Rainey quickly e-mails clients and leads a message about the handymen's talents and availability — first come, first served. "Inevitably I get five more jobs without spending

Schedules Happen

Sharon Rainey's safety net involves padding handymen's schedules and using e-mail to generate last-minute work.



any money," she says. "It gets our name out in front of clients."

Rainey's e-mail blasts can also mitigate weather-related scheduling problems. During a recent week of heavy summer rains, she sent an e-mail saying, "This rain is wreaking havoc on my schedule! I have plenty of outdoor work for Jared and Pat, but until the rain subsides, I need some indoor projects for them. If you have any interior work you need done early next week, please e-mail me your list of tasks!"

Key to Rainey's strategy is having multi-talented handymen. "Some companies think a handyman is a good cash leveler," she says "so they may try to put carpenters out there who don't do plumbing. That's when you can get into trouble. You need a true handyman who can do a little of everything." —*Alice Bumgarner is a freelance writer based in Durham, N.C.*

Improvisational Scheduling

Scheduling isn't a script where every task occurs on cue. It's really more like battle planning — or stand-up comedy — where what matters is having a well thought-out plan that shows whether you're going too fast or too slow, and how to react in order to survive.

"Nothing runs the way you scheduled it. It never happens," says Alice C. Barnes, a senior project manager with Keane, a Boston-based consulting firm. She says the real value of scheduling is to know where you stand once you're knee-deep in a project. Barnes remembers working for AT&T when Lucent Technologies split off from it. The schedule for the final 24 hours leading up to the split "went around an entire conference room, from floor to ceiling," she says. "It was the most detailed thing I'd ever seen," involving hundreds of applications and systems (some from the 19th century), and tasks

scheduled down to the minute for every member of the team.

Yet, despite the enormous preparation that went into the schedule, it wasn't perfect. "Everything ran faster," Barnes says. "You'd be running an hour ahead of schedule, but because you'd hit an external dependency, you wouldn't start the next task. You'd just wait."

In the final analysis, the company split wrapped up "perfectly on time." And that's the point, Barnes says. Sometimes you do nothing — or you finish faster — or you move tasks around. Schedules change. It's OK. Her advice: "Concentrate your energy on the critical path. Keep it running equal to the estimate." If a task isn't on your critical path, "it doesn't matter. Things that by definition can start late or take longer without affecting the end date of a project — they can float around." —*A.B.*

Scheduling Sources

Many remodelers keep their projects on track using a combination of paper-based systems along with a PDA hot-synched to their computer. If you require more than the basics, but less than a complicated scheduling software package, consider the following:

Milestones Simplicity lets you create basic presentation-ready project schedules. \$55; available at www.kidasa.com.

SmartDraw 7 has 1,200+ templates for easy creation of flowcharts, calendars, Gantt charts, and more. \$197; available at www.smartdraw.com.

ConceptDraw Project lets you plan and manage several projects at once. The full ConceptDraw Business Suite incorporates more graphics for illustrating concepts and schedules. \$179 and \$499 respectively; available at www.conceptdraw.com.

Microsoft Office Online has free downloads of scheduling templates that work with Excel, Project, and other Microsoft programs. Available at <http://office.microsoft.com>.