For the GC: 10 Tips for Dodging Deadly Delays

And the Subs Who Read This Will Be Able to Offer Some Advice to Their Favorite GC

Interruption in project schedule is a killer. It invariably requires additional time, attention and labor on the part of the contractor to remedy, all of which cost money—money that should be positive revenue for the company. The problem is that delay can be a silent, slippery bandit. In fact, often you don’t even know you had a problem until after the job is complete and the tallies are taken. And then it’s too late.

Spending money is fine if you had planned on spending it, but cost expended for correcting delay is almost always unaccounted for at bid time, and therefore absorbed as loss. So, delay is clearly the enemy, but it’s hard to fix what you can’t see.

The first step in correcting the problem is to recognize it in the first place. To help you in that quest, let’s take a look at 10 common forms of jobsite delay and—hopefully—through recognition, give you a head start on thwarting the problem before it finds its way to your bottom line.


Major material delays (particularly if only a few days late) are often brushed off as just another “well, that’s the way it is” phenomena on many jobsites, but you must not let yourself or your people adopt this state of mind. I’ve found from experience that if you rely solely on the product’s vendor to ensure the product is delivered on time, you will be disappointed more often than not. And so will your client.

The project manager, superintendent and/or job foreman may all be responsible for tracking and ensuring prompt deliveries to the site. This often means calling the vendor at least weekly during the order period to track progress. Don’t let the vendor call you, for if
there’s a problem, it will often be too late to correct.

Though perhaps seemingly incidental at the time, these deliveries are paramount in maintaining job continuity, scheduling trades, and—yes—even staying momentum (which is very real on many projects). The bottom line: dollars out of your pocket. Purchase orders, vendor order acknowledgments (get order/shipment numbers), prompt shop-drawing/submittal turnaround times, and disciplined and continuous communication with vendors are all major tools in avoiding material delays.


Worthy of its own category, smaller, day-to-day, more routine material delays also have a nasty habit of adding up to substantial losses by the project’s end (which can be months and even years long). Portions of man-hours are sacrificed, continuity is disrupted and morale flickers while waiting. And what about always having to unexpectedly and repeatedly send one of your guys “into town” to pick up small bits of material and/or equipment for stop-gap solutions? This is the forgotten delay and is remedied only through sharp discipline and jobsite planning. This is the type of thing that justifies a couple extra bucks an hour to a more experienced, conscientious jobsite superintendent. The additional salary will almost always be money well spent.

[3] Supervising Jobsite Manpower

And while we’re on the subject, other jobsite situations like overcrowded work areas, differing trades in one area at one time, inadequate crew numbers, interruptions due to waiting for layout/staking, pulling workers away to be sent to other jobs—often to “put out fires,” are another potential for loss. Problems and lost opportunities can arise via shared staging and/or staging areas (for example, not taking advantage of or negotiating a deal with the mason to leave tennis up for the outside painters and the caulking sub). Of course, some events are simply unpredictable, but most often this pitfall is simply the result of poor planning or lack of experience on the part of the supervisor.

Once again (yes, it bears repeating), pay for quality people. There is simply no better place to spend your money.

[4] Equipment Delay

The nice thing about equipment delay is that it’s easily recognizable. When a generator doesn’t show, you know right away. The same goes for heavy equipment. There’s something tangible and recordable that allows you to (possibly) go back later to recoup costs via back-charging, negotiation or other such means.

In the meantime, it’s a relatively straightforward (though aggravating) exercise to hunt down the missing equipment and track lost hours. Still, no one wants the problem. Small firms may simply have to tough it out and be diligent about equipment deliveries. Larger firms, however, may find it within their office overhead to afford a full- or part-time person as a full-time equipment supervisor to log in/out (bar coding?), maintain, schedule and follow up on tool and equipment deliveries to workers.

[5] Tool & Equipment Breakdowns

Any good contractor, regardless of trade, understands the importance of buying only good tools and equipment and then afterward providing a sustained program of maintenance for those items. This includes small tools too, although there will always be some things (like blades and bits) that are justifiably disposable due to their low replacement cost.

Simply put: Burning up a motor, engine, or blowing a hose is never worth the aggravation, the cost of repair, the lost man-hours and job continuity, and the bad public relations that often result. Stay away from cheap. Pay for the good stuff.


I find architectural and engineering delays the most frustrating of all, because the designers (normally) had months—and sometimes even years—to flesh out specs and details long before the project began. Problems with design (often not so much problems as simply missing information) causing project delay seem to hurt the contractor more because they often feel powerless to control the situation. They do, however, foot the bill. The best (and perhaps only) avenue the contractor may have in these cases is to diligently chronicle lost time (in a daily log book) to use as negotiation fodder during the job or toward the end (when the legendary “debit/credit game” kicks in during punchlist time).

Yes, it would be wonderful to charge A/E’s for lost time, but it’s been my expe-
rience that design firms will virtually never admit to wrong-doing (at least to the point of opening their wallets), so you likely have a hard time collecting. If you do get a choice—or do a lot of negotiated work (where you choose the A/E)—one way to minimize the problem is to simply avoid A/E firms that chronically fail to deliver a decent product or enjoy reputations for being difficult to work with.

It doesn’t take long in our industry to figure out which of these firms are most aggravating. Also, as a contractor, you can also act as an ambassador to the project owner. Let him know who’s good and who’s not (nothing petty—I’m talking about sustained problems). Most owners will not only avoid these types (yes, even in light of smaller fees), but will also greatly appreciate the heads-up . . . and grateful customers are a good thing.

[7] Information Flow

In addition to that above, waiting for any information (in any manner of direction: from other contractors, A/Es, owner, utilities, etc.) has a way of bottlenecking continuity and creating lost time on site. Using written Requests for Information and memos to chronicle questions/requests for clarifications can help relieve these roadblocks. It gives the person relaying the information a physical reminder. And even if the answer doesn’t arrive any quicker, this paper trail also allows for physical evidence in case back-charges need to be levied later on.

Once again, communication by itself is the most basic and quickest fix. (Do you see a recurring theme here?) Don’t put off asking questions; if you or one of your workers is unclear on a detail—ask! Identify the discrepancies the moment they come to light, and stay on the request until the ambiguity or problem has been resolved.

[8] Field Error & Personnel Delay

OK, I’ve gotten some licks in on A/Es, but of course we contractors aren’t exactly saints either. Human errors in the field
occur all the time, and many man-hours are lost in the remediation. Since we already know that time does indeed equal money, jobsite quality-control, holding personnel responsible for their workmanship, and adequate morale/training programs are all key in avoiding this pitfall.

Sloppy work or apathetic employees who seem to consistently show up late or “have a hard time getting going” ultimately dip into the company profit well. Clear communication is key but it doesn’t all have to be (and shouldn’t be) all scare-tactics. Positive reinforcement, incentive programs and employee morale awareness all play a role. If you don’t have a formal morale program in place to deal with employee motivation, which also is inextricably tied to employee turnover, get one.

Customer Interference

This one’s kind of touchy, so I’ll try to tread lightly Some customers are wonderful to work with, and others aren’t. Unfortunately, as long as nature indiscriminately allows anyone to have a lot of money, this situation will most likely never change. Clients sometimes do get in the way and cause unnecessary delay on the site, but they’re also the reason we’re working.

Sometimes, your customer will find it necessary to step out and throw his or her weight around. When this occurs, instruct your employees to avoid their first impulse (besides, there are witnesses). Take a deep breath, and take the necessary time to explain, inform and (yes) even cater to the owner’s questions and whims. Most of the time, these small suggestions and changes are minor enough to be accommodated in short time with a minimum of effort.

It almost never pays to charge the owner extra or raise a raucous. It’s simply petty, causes ill will, and the small charge would not even be adequate to cover the office overhead expended working up the change order. Yes, it means some minor losses to your profit, but in the long run you’ve made a customer happy. That minor hit can make for some great PR.
Apathetic employees ultimately dip into the company profit well, but changes on a grander scale (give your job supervisor a general dollar amount so he knows what is small and what isn’t) require the normal, formal change-order procedure and the proper trafficking of information, possibly involving the designers and subcontractors. These will likely end up with a change in cost to the owner and may possibly interrupt project schedule, which also may be chargeable.

Work by Those Outside Your Contract

These are often organizations that are separately contracted by the project owner, firms such as local utility companies, governmental agencies and even furnishing/interior design outfits. You’ve likely noticed by now that these places can sometimes take an—shall we say—apathetic (OK . . . sometimes they just don’t give a hoot) attitude regarding your project and schedule. In fact, some of the longest delays I’ve encountered over the years have come via this genre.

Unfortunately, unless you’re controlling the purse strings, you have little leverage to hold over them to get their work done. If you have a strong owner, you can often ask him to take care of the problem for you (particularly if you’re working with state or local government clients). If the owner is weak or generally disassociated with the project, the only real solution to the problem is to constantly get on the phone to the offending party—morning and evening. Increase the decibel level every time you call. Then, do it again tomorrow, and the next day, and the next day . . . (you get the idea).

About the Author

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