No contractor ever measured his efficiency by pointing to the amount of work that was piled up on his desk. He did it by managing the amount of work that passed over his desk.

Some people might be impressed by a desk piled high with work, but in a contracting business—probably more so than in many other kinds—you must always be prepared for action; you simply can’t afford to be caught with a desk full of “things I’ve just got to get around to doing.”

The tip-off to your efficiency as a manager is the speed and decisiveness with which you go about organizing your work, your desk, your day.

There are as many different techniques for getting organized as there are contractors. But chances are most contractors use one or more of the following suggestions. Some might conform with your own ideas while others perhaps can be adapted to your own working habits.

**Divide Your Work**

Your first task is to divide your work into two parts: (a) tasks that you should delegate to others, and (b) tasks that you must do yourself. If the second group is disproportionately larger than the first, go back and review the division. You just might be kidding your self — and not giving your subordinates the opportunity to grow with added responsibilities.

If your subordinates, assistant, or secretary are to take over more of the day-to-day workload, here are some suggestions you might consider:

1. Your subordinates should be trained so that when they present a problem for your attention they will also suggest a possible solution for your final okay.

2. Try to avoid keeping your fingers in every pie. Yes, in construction it’s very important that you be fully informed on key areas, but constant checking and “looking over peoples’ shoulders” makes them nervous and tends to destroy their initiative and confidence in their ability.

3. Make an effort to follow the management-by-exception rule. Delegate work so that it will be brought back to your attention only if something seems wrong or out of line.

4. Avoid meddling once you have delegated a job. Under ideal
conditions, the lowest-paid employee who is qualified should handle the job. Any other approach is a waste of time and money.

5. Consistent with cost, provide the best equipment for yourself and for your subordinates. This one is often overlooked in the office areas, but it can make a world of difference.

6. Get your letter writing or correspondence out in the morning. (Investigate the timesaving advantage of dictation equipment, too.) This way you need handle correspondence only once.

7. Pencil in brief notes on simple correspondence. Then, if you have a secretary, she can often compose replies for your signature.

You Do the Rest

You’ll need to be cold and calculating about it, but you can bring order to a busy schedule with adjustments in your own work habits.

1. Evaluate and then schedule your own work. Sure, contracting is an unpredictable business, but so are many other businesses. Take a hard look at the way you manage your days. The waste will reveal itself.

2. Attack the unpleasant, difficult jobs first. Get them out of the way while you’re still fresh. Don’t allow them to accumulate.

3. If a problem has you stumped for the moment, put it aside. Come back to it when your mind and mood have improved. Don’t postpone coming to grips with it indefinitely.

4. Dispose of those things that can be handled promptly. A pile of work can be an imposing thing, but a few remaining tasks don’t look so threatening.

5. So it will continue to haunt you, keep unfinished work on top of your desk and in plain sight. When you bury it in a desk drawer, it’s out of sight, out of mind—and often doesn’t get completed.

6. Try to avoid documenting unessential things. Documentation might be important when it comes to change orders, but a quick telephone call may not only be quicker but better in most instances.

7. Analyze your miscellaneous duties from time to time. You just might discover that many of the things you do are merely habit and can be dispensed with. It’s incredible how habit and routine can start you on a slide to wasted time and money.

8. Decide when and what to decide. Some things should be left to benign neglect, and other things need a firm, confident decision NOW.

9. Avoid impatience when communicating with others. The few extra moments spent at the start can often save later grief. A brusque, impatient manner can intimidate a subordinate, send him away with an unclear idea of what you want.