

# Business

## Using Checklists to Eliminate the Punch List

by Carl Seville

In 2001 my Atlanta remodeling company, SawHorse, launched a “zero punch” program, which sought to eliminate the final punch list on all jobs. Since we had five or six project managers on the payroll at any given time, as well as working relationships with a couple of dozen subcontractors, the effort posed a real management challenge. We were always looking for tools our project managers could use to help subs reach the zero-punch goal.

We developed one such tool ourselves: a series of one-

page checklists containing the items that each trade needs to complete on all jobs. These lists — which are filled out by the sub and certified by the project manager — help standardize work procedures and reduce the number of punch-list items. They also make the management process easier.

Our project managers and subs played a crucial role in the creation of the checklists. We began by meeting with the field staff and compiling lists of the items that

The author’s subcontractor checklists include general items that apply to all trades (below) as well as trade-specific specs (bottom).

Confirm that you are working from a complete set of correct plans released for construction  
Review plans thoroughly. Direct any questions to the Project Manager.  
Read any instructions before installing products. Save all instructions for homeowner  
Do not assume anything, ask questions of project manager if you don't understand something  
Do not discuss the work with the homeowner  
Do not make any changes or additions without consulting the Project Manager  
Inspect the existing conditions before you start work. Alert Project Manager to any problems with the substrate you are working on that are not acceptable. NOTE: Unless defects are pointed out prior to beginning work, you will be responsible for the cost of any rework necessary to correct defects.  
Maintain a clean and safe work area.  
You are responsible for cleaning up all debris from your work, separating recycleable material from trash and placing each in appropriate containers or locations designated by Project Manager

### Electrical Checklist

Project Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Trade Contractor: \_\_\_\_\_

Blended as an aide for you to ensure a quality job. It is not intended to be a comprehensive checklist that you develop your own quality assurance checklist based on your requirements to all sections of this list before starting work. When you are finished with the rough and final that your work is complete, meets all applicable codes, and has no defects. Deliver this list for final invoice for the rough and finish phases of the work. Payments will not be issued until form.

**Final Completion Checklist:**

- Final inspection passed
- All devices, fixtures, and equipment installed and complete
- Check operation of all fixtures, receptacles, and equipment to confirm they are correctly powered
- Work area clean, recycleable material stored, debris disposed of properly
- All spare parts and documents delivered to Project Manager

Trade Contractor: I certify that the rough-in work is complete: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Project Manager: Work is not complete, Initials \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Retain until Release I  
Work is fully completed, Initials \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Ceramic Tile Checklist

Initials \_\_\_\_\_

**General Information:**

|   | Yes                      | No                       | N/A                      |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Confirm that you are working from a complete set of correct plans released for construction  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Review plans thoroughly. Direct any questions to the Project Manager.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Read any instructions before installing products. Save all instructions for homeowner  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Do not assume anything, ask questions of project manager if you don't understand something   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Do not discuss the work with the homeowner   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Do not make any changes or additions without consulting the Project Manager  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Inspect the existing conditions before you start work. Alert Project Manager to any problems with the substrate you are working on that are not acceptable. NOTE: Unless defects are pointed out prior to beginning work, you will be responsible for the cost of any rework necessary to correct defects. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> You are responsible for cleaning up all debris from your work, separating recycleable material from trash and placing each in appropriate containers or locations designated by Project Manager  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

**Pre-Construction Checklist:**

- Confirm all tile materials, pattern
- Confirm that all materials are on

**Final Completion Checklist:**

- Lippage between tiles less than 1/16"
- Thinset all tile board to subfloor
- Do not use mastic for any installations
- All grout complete and cleaned off tile
- All inside corners caulked with silicone caulk
- Work area clean, recycleable material stored, debris disposed of properly
- All spare parts and documents delivered to Project Manager

**Job Specific Items:**

|                          | Yes                      | No                       | N/A                      | \$ |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|----|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | \$ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | \$ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | \$ |

Trade Contractor: I certify that the work is complete: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Project Manager: Work is not complete, Initials \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Retain until completion \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
Work is fully completed, Initials \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Release full payment

## Business | Using Checklists to Eliminate the Punch List

needed to be completed during each phase of their work. Then we met with our subs, who helped us tweak the lists into their final form. When all 20-plus checklists were complete, in late 2005, we scheduled kickoff meetings to formally present the program to the trades. Implementation went smoothly: Only minor revisions were needed after the checklists made their way into the field, and they became a permanent part of our work process.

### How the Checklist System Works

Before subcontractors start work on a job, they are given a copy of the checklist, along with job plans and specs and a four-page agreement that outlines all our procedures and expectations — work hours, the company's smoking policy, how retainage is figured for unfinished work, and so on. To get paid, subs have to submit a completed checklist with their invoice. Trades like electrical and plumbing — who receive payments after the rough and final phases — must submit the checklist to the project manager at the completion of each phase.

While the details of each trade's checklist vary, the forms all follow a similar format. Most have sections for general information, preconstruction, rough-in, final completion, and job-specific items.

The goal of the general information and preconstruction sections is to get everyone to think through the job and take action ahead of time to avoid problems. The sub and the project manager both have to certify that the sub is working from plans that have been completed and released for construction. They also must certify that they've inspected — and accepted — the existing conditions.

Subcontractors know that this is their

one chance to get the project manager to correct any problems. For example, the painting contractor needs to make sure before starting work that trim nails have been properly set and drywall seams adequately sanded. If he doesn't and problems result with the finish, he's responsible for making corrections.

In addition, subs must confirm that they've read the instructions for any unfamiliar products. I have seen too many guys install something for the first time without reading the instructions and then make a mistake. If that happens now, the burden is on the sub to fix the problem on his own time. That provides some incentive to read the instructions and get questions answered before starting work.

We also reiterate important company policies in these sections — like reminding the subcontractor that he should not discuss the job directly with the homeowner.

The electrical, mechanical, and plumbing checklists contain a rough-in section that reminds subs to double-check all in-wall installations before drywall goes up. It also includes a checkbox for rough inspection.

All checklists have a section for job completion, where the project manager and subcontractor certify that the work is finished, that spare parts and warranty information have been handed to the project manager, and that the work has passed final inspection. During this stage, the project manager will walk the house with the sub; with the electrical contractor, for example, he'll make sure all of the lights, outlets, and other fixtures are working.

The final section — for job-specific items — is the place to note items unique to the job. On the plumbing checklist, this is where we would note an on-demand

hot-water pump; on the painting list, we might designate a specific area of the house to be used for cleanup.

### Getting Everyone On Board

Surprisingly, perhaps, it wasn't difficult to get buy-in from our subs. For one thing, they knew they wouldn't get paid without completing a checklist.

But the real reason things went so smoothly had to do with how we implemented the procedure and how SawHorse does business in general. The fact that we hadn't missed a payment during 20 years in business had built up a lot of goodwill and trust with subs. Moreover, it helped that the checklists weren't something cooked up by the owners and dumped on the field. Instead, the subcontractors, project managers, and even the company's field carpenters all had a say in creating them. When we introduced the final checklists to the subs, the project managers they worked with every day were a key part of the presentation.

### The Payoffs

The checklist system has proved to be a great time-saver. Previously, project managers had to spend a lot of time negotiating the various items that are now on the lists. By clarifying our expectations for every part of the job, the checklists eliminated most of that negotiation.

Having a formal procedure also reduced disagreements over retainage. Before, if the electrician sent in a final invoice but the project manager knew there were some broken fixtures on the job, the company would retain some money until the items were corrected. This worked most of the time, but there were always cases where the sub considered the retainage too high. The checklist system solved that problem: Now, if a trade

## Business | Using Checklists to Eliminate the Punch List

contractor complains about the retainage amount, the company has a record of what was held back for similar work on other jobs. Over time, this has tended to standardize the penalties imposed by project managers, which has reduced the number of complaints.

The checklist system started to pay for itself almost immediately. We spent less time chasing subs and arguing about retainage, and we didn't have to explain our expectations every time we started a job. The lists also formed the seed of a subcontractor rating system. Over time, we began to use the checklists to track how many retainage items each sub had. The better subs — the ones with fewer of these items — would be our first choice on any job. In effect, the system raised the quality bar for everyone.

*Formerly an owner of SawHorse Inc., a residential remodeling firm in Atlanta, **Carl Seville** now consults with contractors on sustainability issues.*



## **Carl Seville**

[carl@sevilleconsulting.com](mailto:carl@sevilleconsulting.com)

[www.sevilleconsulting.com](http://www.sevilleconsulting.com)

Carl Seville is a green builder, educator, and consultant on sustainability to the residential construction industry. He founded and served as Vice President of SawHorse, Inc; an Atlanta design/build firm for 25 years. While at SawHorse, he served as the chairman of the committee that developed the Earthcraft House Renovation program and supervised the pilot homes for that program.

He is the recipient of numerous industry awards including the 2005 and 2007 Green Remodeling Advocate of the Year, the 2004 and 2006 National Green Building Awards for Residential Remodeling, six Excellence in Design Awards from *Environmental Design and Construction* magazine, the Southface Energy Institute Award of Excellence for Environmental Stewardship, and the 2006 EarthCraft House Leadership award.

Carl is an NAHB Certified Trainer, a HERS rater, a LEED for Homes Provider Representative and an NAHB Green Building Program verifier. He has served on the boards of directors of the Greater Atlanta Homebuilders Association and the Atlanta chapter of NARI, the Green Building Subcommittee and the Green Building Education Curriculum Committee of NAHB, NARI's Green Remodeling Education Committee, the Georgia Governor's Energy Policy Council, and the Editorial Advisory Boards of *Professional Remodeling* and *Atlanta Home Improvement* magazines. He is the USGBC Residential Green Building Advocate for Atlanta and was a co-author of the USGBC/ASIC ReGreen residential green remodeling guidelines. He currently hosts a blog titled "The Green Building Curmudgeon".