

# Finding Budget Fat in Lean Economic Times: The Benefits of Facility Management Software

**B**y most accounts, the U.S. economy will recover from its current recession very slowly, over a period of many months. Full recovery may be years away. As a result, organizations in all sectors of the economy—from Fortune 500 companies to not-for-profit entities like schools and school districts—will con-

tinue to have to do more with less. Maximizing the use and usefulness of existing resources will be a must.

Of course, recognizing the need for frugality is easy, but acting on it is significantly more difficult. Facility management software is one tool that schools can use to squeeze more from their budgets, especially when it comes to the before- and after-school events that account for an increasing amount of staff time and resource use. School *districts* can realize even greater benefits from using scheduling software to coordinate their event planning operations.

## The Conservation Mind-Set

How can schools get the most out of their facilities, their equipment, and their personnel? It starts with a change of perspective on what a “resource” is. From the largest school districts to the smallest neighborhood schools, education entities must realize that the poor use of space, equipment, and other assets is not just an unfortunate consequence of hectic schedules and bare-bones staffing. It is, in no uncertain terms, waste—no less so than throwing unopened reams of printer paper into the trash. And it affects the facility’s bottom line. However, once a school begins to view intangibles like time and space as resources, then a conservation mind-set can be cultivated.

## Identifying Inefficiencies

With conservation in mind, a school can identify specific areas for improvement. For example, purchasing a new piece of equipment that is “necessary to meet growing needs” is wasteful when careful scheduling of existing equipment could meet those needs without the added expense.

In the same way, hiring more custodial staff to help handle a growing number of events is inef-



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By Tom Schek

efficient if simply analyzing patterns of room use will allow the existing staff to do the work. In poorly scheduled facilities, the maintenance crew is often asked to prepare two separate rooms in exactly the same layout for events that do not overlap and that could be held in the same room with only a few minutes of tidying between bookings. Failure to identify and use an existing setup results in twice the personnel cost for the two events. Convention centers, conference facilities, and other for-profit organizations use this minimal turnaround philosophy to minimize labor costs; school districts can benefit from the same approach.

To put a financial face on it, suppose a maintenance staff member earns \$12 per hour and it takes him or her 30 minutes (or \$6 in personnel cost) to prepare a room for an event. If he or she fails to take advantage of the opportunity to put the second similar event in the same room, the school must pay an additional \$6 to set up another room. Standing alone, this number is insignificant. However, if this type of situation occurs even once a day—not hard to imagine in a busy school—the cost per week of \$30 extends to \$1,560 per year. Multiply that by 10–15 schools in a district, and scheduling inefficiencies can cost nearly \$25,000 per year!

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Another area of improvement for many schools and school districts is cost recovery. Without an efficient method for tracking facility use and billing the users, many districts have historically “written off” the cost of providing space for before- and after-school events scheduled by the general public. However, with schools’ seeing an increasing volume of nonschool events, officials understand the need to recover the cost of those events.

These are just a few examples of the budget “fat” that can be found in lean economic times. But unlike budget dollars, these time and space assets cannot be put in the bank. Schools must capitalize on them immediately or they are lost.

### **Implementing a Facility-Scheduling System**

Many methods are available for reserving space in facilities. Some schools still use what is often referred to as the “big black book”—a bulky, hardbound reservation book. Others struggle to get by with homegrown computer programs or calendaring systems created for some other pur-

pose. However, the best tool for facility scheduling is a software program specifically designed for managing events.

As executive vice president of Dean Evans & Associates, a software company that produces a variety of facility and event management software programs, Kevin Raasch is an expert in the event management technology field. “In this day and age, it’s not just a disadvantage for a school district to be scheduling events manually or using an inadequate computer system, it’s bad business,” says Raasch. “And while a district’s number one priority is education and not business, staying on or under budget frees up money that can be used to pursue educational objectives.”

### **The Benefits of Facility-Scheduling Software**

The list of benefits that organizations receive from using facility-scheduling software is long. Three of the main areas in which a scheduling program can help are increased scheduling efficiency; optimization of rooms, resources, and cash flow; and improved communication.

#### **INCREASED SCHEDULING EFFICIENCY**

Scheduling simple, one-time-only events in a handful of rooms can be accomplished with any type of system. Even the “sticky notes on the computer monitor” method will work. However, with each new element you add to the equation (multiple dates and rooms, equipment, personnel, etc.), the complexity of the task increases significantly.

Facility management software provides a number of tools for simplifying event scheduling and increasing scheduling efficiency. For example, most systems have a search function that helps users quickly find space for an event, even a multirate, multiroom session. The result of the search is a room that the system has verified as being available and that can then be booked.

Not only does this computer-driven reservation process save time, it also prevents users from inadvertently creating a scheduling conflict. And any scheduling coordinator will tell you that nothing is more embarrassing for your staff, more frustrating for your visitors, or more damaging to your reputation as an event-hosting site than a double-booked room.

“When using a program not specifically designed for facility management, we had some double bookings, which caused some uncomfortable communication and relationship issues,” says Bonnie Hogoboom, student/community services secretary for Delton-Kellogg (Michigan) Schools. “Since implementing a true facility management system, we haven’t had any conflicts. Letting the computer watch for conflicts and alert you has made scheduling the facilities of the school district much easier.”

The more powerful reservations systems have advanced scheduling functions, like a date pattern selection option with which the system can instantly select a complex pattern of dates (e.g., the second and fourth Monday and Wednesday of each month for the next 9 months). They might also have a “best fit” search option that can piece

together an event when no one room is available for all the requested dates. Reservations, especially those for large or recurring events, are created in a fraction of the time it takes to make them manually.

The process for adding resources to events is equally efficient with an on-line system. With the better scheduling programs, users can determine whether enough resources are available by simply requesting an item and letting the system evaluate whether a conflict exists. The need for multiple phone calls or e-mails to the department responsible for providing the item or service is eliminated.

Further savings in time and effort can be achieved with the copy and change tools found in most facility-scheduling programs. Functions for copying resources from one event to another, for copying an entire event to a future date, and for changing all of the bookings in an existing reservation are commonly available.

Each of the room and resource scheduling features in a facility management system trims minutes off a particular task. It is not uncommon to hear from scheduling coordinators who use manual or inefficient on-line systems that the time required to book a room, reserve resources for the event, make changes to the event, and communicate with the customer is 30 minutes or more. With a true facility management software package, coordinators can typically reduce that time by 8 to 10 minutes per event. For a district that hosts thousands of events a year, those minutes add up to hundreds of person-hours that can be focused on other tasks.

#### **OPTIMIZATION OF ROOMS, RESOURCES, AND CASH FLOW**

The room setup scenario described earlier is only one example of how a facility management system can help a school or district optimize the use of its physical space. Additional options in the room search function can also play a role. Many systems allow users to indicate a specific type of room, a room with certain built-in features or characteristics, or a room with a particular capacity. These types of functions help ensure that event schedulers can provide visitors with rooms that meet their needs. For example, when space is used properly, schools don't find themselves in situations where they must turn away a group of 100 because a meeting of 30 people has been inappropriately scheduled in the 150-seat auditorium.

As previously mentioned, most facility-scheduling packages can also be used to reserve resources, such as equipment. Programs with automatic inventory verification allow users to quickly and confidently reserve a resource, knowing that the system will alert them if that resource would be overbooked. With the system providing oversight, users are more comfortable scheduling resources, especially when an item is needed several times each day. Rather than increase their inventories, schools can meet their customers' resource needs by better using their existing inventories.

To get the most out of the data that you enter into your database, you must be able to analyze them. Good facility management software provides users with a variety of statistical reports. With these tools, schools can identify trends in room use, attendance by event type, and so forth and use the information to set pricing, anticipate staffing and equipment needs, and, in general, administer an effective reservations program.

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Another area in which facility-scheduling software can provide "optimization" is cash flow. Some schools and districts do not yet charge fees for the use of their rooms and resources because of the challenges of managing an "accounts receivable" function. Many scheduling systems include an integrated invoicing component that makes billing easy. System-generated invoices, payment tracking, and financial reports simplify the potentially complex task of financial management.

According to Gale Marihugh, facilities coordinator at Issaquah (Washington) School District No. 411, officials there saw a steady increase in reservation volume as their cue to purchase a scheduling system. "As demand for before- and after-school space grew, the school board recognized the need to recover the cost of community use," says Marihugh. "Because our facilities were in almost constant use, school secretaries were at times overwhelmed with facilities scheduling. To give those secretaries time to do their school work and to improve the billing system to outside users, the district decided to centralize facility scheduling. Now, the district benefits from recovered costs, documented facility use, improved communication, and school-building staff focused on students."

How much can a school benefit from recovering the cost of community events? An estimate of \$50 for a school to host an event may be conservative. But if that school averages just two events each day of the school week, that is \$500 per week, or \$26,000 per year. Multiply that by 10 schools in a district, and the financial benefit of cost recovery can be huge!

#### **IMPROVED COMMUNICATION**

One of the biggest benefits provided by facility management software is that scheduling coordinators who were using manual systems can eliminate the response that they frequently had to give when asked about room or resource availability: "I'm not sure. Let me make a few phone calls

and get back to you.” Not only does this response leave the caller less than satisfied with the level of customer service, it frequently leads to a frustrating and time-consuming series of voice mails, e-mails and to-do lists. Phone tag, lengthy e-mail dialogues, and the associated waste of time can be all but eliminated when the coordinator has instant access to a centralized, constantly updated data source.

Even better than providing the scheduling coordinator instant access to reservation data is providing the *customer* instant access to those data. Some facility management systems have an Internet component that allows real-time access to information on existing reservations and space availability. In this way, the scheduling office is, to a certain extent, open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The best on-line systems even allow Web site visitors to submit reservation requests directly from the Internet!

Also helping to improve communication are the operational reports that most scheduling programs provide. With just a few clicks of the mouse, internal users can generate a variety of calendars, event lists, and setup reports. With some systems, reports can be e-mailed directly to the recipient, saving time and paper. Says Ralynn Whitelock, scheduling manager for the Brandon Valley (South Dakota) School District, “With a manual system, we felt as if we never knew who was in our buildings using the gyms and classrooms. The availability of the reports and event schedules in our program has given our custodial supervisors the information they need practically at their fingertips.”

Some systems also have an automatic e-mail notification function. This tool follows user-defined guidelines to determine which of your staff members should receive system-generated e-mails regarding new events or changes to existing ones, and the time frames and types of events that trigger the notification.

Once a reservation has been made, most facility-scheduling systems can produce a “confirmation.” This document, which typically lists the date and time of the event and other important information, can be given to the organization that is holding the event to confirm that their reservation is in the database.

## Summary

Even in a recession, there is budget “fat” to be found if you know where to look and you have a tool to help you find it. By implementing a facility-management software program, schools and school districts can increase their scheduling efficiency, optimize the use of their physical space and resources, and improve communication. Organizations that put effective scheduling practices in place now continue to reap the benefits of those practices no matter how the economy fares down the road. ■

Tom Schek is the communications coordinator for Dean Evans & Associates, which develops, markets, and supports software products for facility scheduling and event management. He has been involved in client services, documentation, and training.

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