



Ten principles for effective production planning

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Pascal Pollet

Guidelines for more reliable, flexible scheduling

In high-mix, low-volume and make-to-order environments, production scheduling is often complex. Long lead times, unpredictable delivery times and a shop floor cluttered with WIP (Work in Progress) are typical challenges. The use of planning software alone will not help unless the basic principles are in place. Here are ten practical guidelines to make production planning more reliable, flexible and predictable.

1. Establish S&OP as the foundation with real-time adjustment as the capstone

Effective production scheduling must work on three levels:

- **Strategic:** a strong Sales & Operations Planning (S&OP) process that balances demand and capacity
- **Tactical:** the S&OP is translated into plans with achievable delivery dates
- **Operational:** disruptions are handled via real-time adjustment on the shop floor

If all three are working together, the result is calm, predictability and flexibility. If even one of them is missing, the whole system comes under pressure.

2. Never plan for 100% capacity

A fully booked schedule will collapse the first time a glitch occurs. You should therefore apply a capacity limit of **80-85%**. This leaves room for rush orders, breakdowns and variability. Reliable delivery then becomes a conscious choice, not a coincidence.

3. Strict focus on order release

The time of order release determines how much work arrives on the floor.

- **Releasing too early** ? chaos and a cluttered shop floor
- **Releasing too late** ? backlogs and empty workstations

Only release orders once the materials, information and capacity are available. This will ensure that the shop floor stays manageable.

4. Radically limit WIP

The more WIP there is, the longer and more unpredictable lead times will be. Limit WIP using methods such as [CONWIP](#), [POLCA](#) or [Workload Control](#). This reduces lead time, makes bottlenecks visible and prevents waste.

5. Actively manage bottlenecks

A bottleneck determines the output and lead time for the whole system.

- Deploy staff and resources flexibly at the bottleneck
- Monitor continuously, because bottlenecks shift
- Provide targeted relief to avoid congestion

Active bottleneck management increases throughput and improves delivery reliability.

6. Detect backlogs early

Small backlogs are easy to make up, but large ones are next to impossible. Therefore, you should:

- Detect delays early
- Respond immediately
- Follow clear, pre-agreed rules

This makes adjustment almost automatic and keeps the schedule under control.

7. Follow sequencing rules in a disciplined way

The order in which orders are processed has a big impact on delivery reliability. Use clear sequencing rules such as **Earliest Due Date** or **FIFO**. Disciplined and consistent application of the rule is more important than which one you choose.

8. Ensure your schedule has the resilience to deal with variability

Disruptions are inevitable. Building in time, capacity or inventory buffers allows you to make the system resilient. The result will be that a deviation does not immediately lead to delivery problems.

9. Structurally reduce lead times

Short lead times are the key to:

- Improved delivery reliability
- Lower scheduling burden
- Less firefighting

Shorter lead times are achieved not by working harder, but through smarter organisation. Examples include smaller batch sizes, performing operations in parallel or cross-training employees.

10. Increase visibility of status and priorities

Things that are visible can be talked about and controlled. Make WIP, bottlenecks and backlogs transparent using visual boards or digital dashboards. This will lead to shared understanding, improved collaboration and consistent priorities.

From complex to effective planning

By consistently applying these 10 principles, you can transform your production planning from a source of uncertainty to a powerful steering tool. It doesn't require more detail or complicated software, but simplicity, discipline and structural improvements.

Ready to improve efficiency in your manufacturing business?

Find out more about our expertise in Quick Response Manufacturing and how we can help you optimise production with less Work in Progress.

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Authors



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