

Do you add Every Instruction to the Programme?

Published LinkedIn 10 March 2026

Contractors are often advised by professional planners to add every Contract Instruction to the programme, just in case one of those Instructions is a Variation that has a time impact that they need to claim.

This is a sensible discipline in an enterprise where overlooking or unthinkingly absorbing changes can end up being costly and the undoing of many a business.

On smaller projects, this task falls to the PM and on a larger to a specialised planning team.

Sometimes this sensible discipline can come unstuck. There is an awkward middle-size type of project where a high frequency of low-value instructions get issued. There is not enough value in the changes to cover the cost of additional resource to enter them in the programme, but there is too much volume for the standard resource to keep up with the put-everything-in-the-programme method. I've seen this situation occur on many a remedial or retrofit site, where the minor discoveries and work arounds don't stop until the job does. The small-to-medium size project team ends up drowning in a sea of new line items in the programme and the programme software itself can become tangled and unreliable as the overwhelm introduces user errors in logic linkages.

In this kind of circumstance, it is far more effective to assess and triage the new instructions and only selectively add them to the programme. Why?

Think of washing your hands and then, why you wash your hands. Are you washing your hands to reduce the risk of getting sick from germs, or, because you are worried about the risk of getting sick from germs? Washing your hands will solve both problems, but a big worrier could develop an obsession that while being effective at reducing germs, has side effects that do more harm than good to their overall health.

How often you should wash your hands depends on understanding the risk and setting appropriate behaviours. I might choose to wash my hands after the bathroom, when I come home at night, and before cooking and eating. Someone working in a hospital where the risk settings are greater, might do the same, and then add before and after each patient interaction and before or after certain tasks while at work (even if that's just blowing their nose).

It's important to have a good think about the risks and set some appropriate behaviour settings that are manageable in terms of time and brain-space. It's also important to circle back and check in on those settings periodically.

Thinking about a "typical" small-to-medium project worth, say, between \$5m-\$30m experiencing a high volume of instructions (one or more per day on average) and a monthly client-reporting cadence, here is a guideline for programme and instruction "hygiene":

- Log and action instructions as they come in (do they need to be passed on to subcontractors or suppliers, if so, how can this be done clearly and efficiently, making sure those downstream understand whether it is a change-now and price-later or price-first-confirm-later situation? Is there a way to automate this process within the team?)
- Assess as a group and triage weekly for programme impact – ask the questions, What new materials do I need to do this, do they come with a lead time? What activity is prevented from starting by this new thing? Can I get the new thing done before the original date that that original thing was supposed to start? Do I have enough resources, or can I get more resources to fit this in at the same time as what the team is already doing?
- Add only Instructions that are having or are likely to have a time impact to the programme either weekly or fortnightly (potentially link this job with a discipline of striking-off the cost from any placeholder line item in a Variation schedule, if it's been established there is no cost). This can slide to once-a-month-in-time-for-the-report, but it's better to stay ahead, doing one, un-rushed regular update earlier in the month and another one to check and top-up just before the report is due.
- Issue updates to programme at monthly meeting, with a clear, brief, covering narrative describing what has been changed and the impact of those changes.
- Raise EOT claims (if one is justified) to match a programme update as closely as possible to the issue of the updated programme
- Circle back periodically to check that the triage selections have been accurate, and that the cumulative volume of changes itself is not having an impact (this can lead to disruption, rather than specific delay)