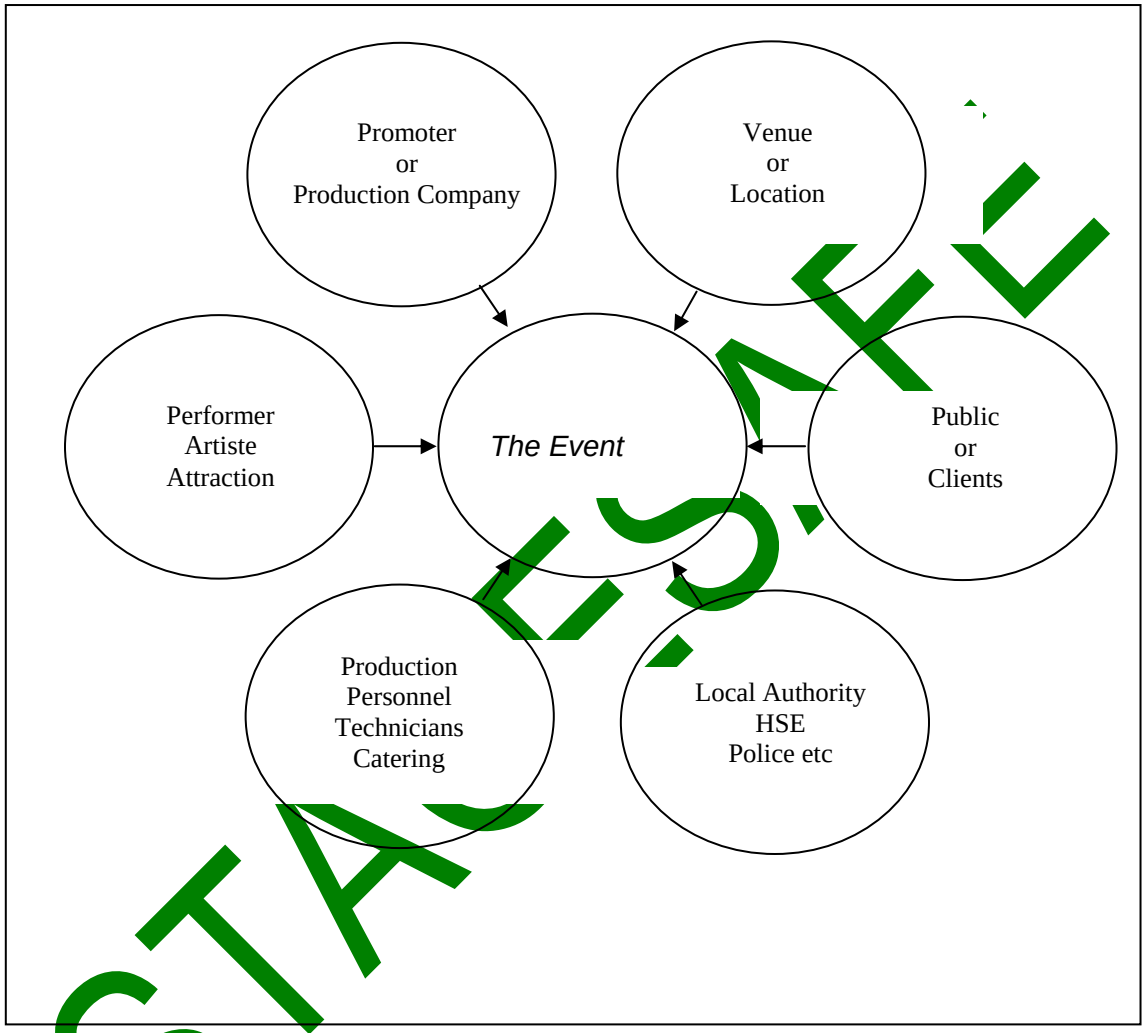
Basic Production Methodology and Communications

Event Types

Events and shows fall into many categories, they may be Concerts, Product Launches, Sporting Events, Theatre, Mass Public Gatherings, Trade Shows, Conferences, Exhibitions, Craft Fairs, Rock Festivals and everything in between.



1.2 The Promoter

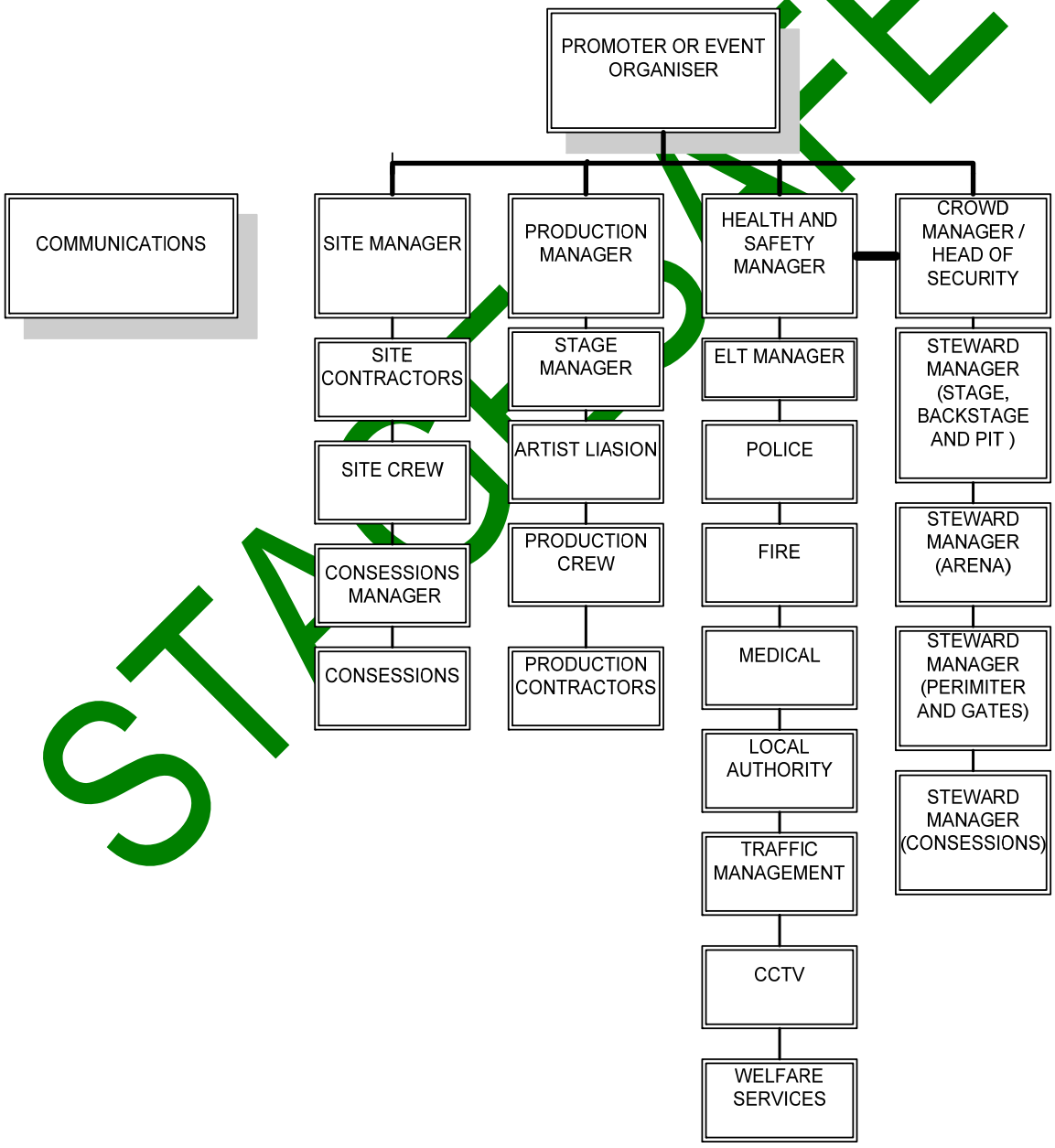
The Promoter or organiser is the key person in any event or show and the position carries huge responsibilities. The promoter is responsible for hiring the artists and performers that make up the show, the provision of a venue or site suitable to stage the show, ensuring the health and safety of all involved (public, artists, employees and contractors), advertising and marketing the event or show, and financially underwriting all the incurred costs.

A promoter may be anyone from the Landlord of a pub who hires a band to entertain customers for the occasional special event, a charity who stages a fund raising event or a company who specialise in promoting concerts, festivals and tours.

Some promoters are also venue owners, some specialise in running festivals or major outdoor concerts and some will promote a whole tour or section of a tour by a particular artist or band. Promoters stand to make large sums of money from large well-organised and well-promoted shows and events. They also stand to lose huge sums should sales be poor, or if the planning and organisation are in any way lacking.

If the event or show the promoter proposes to organise is a music event, as part of the Promoters responsibilities he or she will need to apply for, and be granted, a Public Entertainment Licence from the Local Authority (if the venue to be used does not hold a Licence granted to it on an annual basis).

EXEMPLE OF AN EVENT MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE



In this flow chart communications is shown to be separate but in reality the majority of radio messages between all departments will pass through the Communications Control Room where they will be logged.

The emergency services will normally operate their own communication systems and it is very likely that Event Stewarding / Security will have its own radio control and network.

Each Steward Manager will control a number of Steward Supervisors who will in turn each supervise about twelve stewards.

Communications

Effective communications are a fundamental element within an efficient, successful and professionally presented safety structure. Safety information can be multifunctional and multifaceted, reliant upon the skill and ability of the operator for maximum impact. Communications is a complex area and needs special attention, this chapter only starts to touch the surface. The type and range of this communication can be illustrated by the following list (which is in no way exhaustive).

- “Post It” notes
- Labels on a flight cases showing contents, weight and centre of gravity
- Production Schedules
- Site Plans (that should be gridded for accuracy in passing location information)
- Engineering Drawings
- Day Sheets
- Riders
- Itinerary’s
- Contingency Plans
- Contracts
- Manufactures Instructions
- Method Statements
- Risk Assessments
- Health and Safety Policies
- HSE Publications including Regulations and Guidance
- Approved Codes of Practice
- Signs
- Screens and Video Walls

In order to receive and transmit information most of us use quite sophisticated communication systems on a daily basis. Typically, we use the Internet, P.A. systems, phones and fax. Accurate and professional use of this equipment in an event situation is essential as they are key tools for both the event organiser and production manager, they must never be underestimated as a safety tool. Both written and verbal communications remain at the heart of human communications systems, but we must learn to develop and embrace new technology that enhances and maximises opportunities whilst learning to use equipment correctly and building on existing communication skills.

Radios are another instrument in common use at events; however, many of us are uninformed about the correct way to use these radio systems. I have overheard all sorts of rubbish being talked over these airways together with a lot of unintelligible dialogue. The problem with incorrect usage of an essential communication system is that had there been an emergency, it may have resulted in fatal consequences simply because the message would have been blocked from reaching its destination.

If a communications system is to be effective it needs careful planning, a Communications Manager may be required at a large event to co-ordinate the whole operation and all messages will need to be recorded at a central control position.
Anyone who has worked in an event radio control room will know how just how important a well run control room is and how stressful this work can be.

An event control room is often a multi agency operation reflecting the joint working practices and partnerships that underpin effective management of large events. These partnerships will typically include such organisations as the Police, Fire Service, Ambulance Service and Local Authority. All working in conjunction and close co-operation with the event organisers Traffic Manager, Safety Officer, Production Manager, Site Manager and Crowd Safety Officer, this same group may also form the core of the Emergency Liaison Team.

Field telephones, C.B. radio and amateur radio systems will often be considered a probable means of effective communication for large outdoor events. This form of communication is most effective when used in conjunction with a dedicated radiotelephone system.

Where information has to be communicated to large crowds and no P.A. system exists, the use of loud hailers has proved to be an efficient and effective alternative system. Large video screens or video walls are provide a particularly effective manner of disseminating information to large crowds and therefore should be considered as a particularly useful element within the overall crowd management system.

Where P.A. systems and video screens/walls are to be used for emergency announcements procedures should be put in place for dealing with such announcements. Stage managers, sound crew, video crew, the artist and

management team together with announcers need to be fully briefed of these procedures in advance; similarly a simple procedure should be in place for stopping a show or performance in an emergency.

Prior to a large outdoor event, tests should be carried out to see if suitable signal strength exists for mobile phones, service providers might consider installing temporary masts and booster systems to low signal areas for large events. Even in areas where a good signal exists it still may not be possible to make and receive calls at certain peak times due to the cells being overload by the huge extra numbers of users, New Years Eve 2000 springs to mind here, it is for this reason that mobile phones should not be relied upon as a primary means of communication.

It is important that P.A. companies and those supplying or operating radio microphones and “in ear” monitoring systems use only systems “Licensed” by JFMG Ltd., who manage and license radio systems used in programme making and special events. Unlicensed radios may operate on frequencies that interfere with the emergency services and you may get interference and messages from the local radio mini-cab service being transmitted over the P.A. This obviously means yet more work for Production Managers checking on radio licences.

Verbal communication is the most common, but perhaps the most easily overlooked communication system in use on shows and events. Verbal instructions are great because they’re, quick, efficient and require no preparation. The drawback is that the two participants must speak the same language, they must be in a space where verbal communication is possible – and they must have developed the skill of listening. Perhaps the biggest drawback of verbal communication is that they’re transient, no record exists of who said what, and if a dispute ensues it’s impossible to prove who’s at fault. To this end it’s always a good idea to take notes when receiving verbal instruction – whether it be on the phone or face to face.

Often verbal communication is facilitated by technical systems, allowing communication over long distances or in areas of high noise. These communication systems fall into two basic types: talkback / intercom or show communication headsets, and handheld radios.

Headsets

Show headsets are most commonly used by Stage Managers, ASM’s, Lighting Operators, Follow Spot Op’s and so on. The system consists of a single earpiece headset with an integral boom mic that curves to the operators mouth. The headset is attached to a *Beltpack* that contains volume control, Talk button and Call light/button. The beltpack itself is connected to other users by means of standard microphone XLR leads. At the end of the chain is a base station that supplies power to the users.

Such systems are usually referred to as ‘Comms’ or ‘Cans’, and are excellent tools for calling cues, giving instructions and talking between stage and FoH. There are however a couple of easy operational mistakes that render the system useless, these are:

- Failing to press the Talk button, so no-one can hear you even when you shout
- Not setting the volume correctly so you either can’t hear instructions or are deafened
- Stepping on the lead while you’re moving and pulling out one or both of the XLR links
- Never looking at the unit if you’re not wearing the headset, and failing to register that someone is frantically calling. Some systems are fitted with an additional Xenon flasher to indicate a call.

Aside from the specific technical operations, comms systems present more general problems. The first, and most difficult to solve, is the issue of chatter. It is almost impossible to stop unproductive chit-chat over headsets – especially when there are several people on line. Chat in itself is harmless, but it leads to lapses in concentration and makes it harder to distinguish between real messages and background blather. Jokes over cans are often extremely amusing, but they reduce concentration on the gig and engender a relaxed approach, which is only a step away from carelessness.

Equal problems might occur when you become reliant on the comms system. Should a member of the team leave their headset station to carry out other work, this can lead to aggravation on the part of other users. Americans for example have a tradition whereby certain headset stations are constantly manned, if you come to rely on this and the person isn’t there, you can be thrown

Headset comms require slow, even speech to work properly – especially in high volume places and some practice is needed before you can comfortably communicate on cans.

Information Technology

The IT revolution has made communication easier and easier. Virtually everyone has a mobile phone these days and most people have access to the Internet. Increasingly production communication takes place by means of e-mail text and attachments. If you are not already familiar with sending and receiving e-mail and attachments, you are strongly advised to learn. Pretty soon it will be the standard means of communicating. IT of course brings its own problems, not least in terms of soft and hardware compatibility, and the Mac/PC debate rages as strongly in our field as elsewhere. The only advice is, use what works for you, and is compatible with your commonest colleagues.

Mobile Phones

Mobiles are the greatest curse and boon of the touring person. It is not within the scope of this course to offer advice on phone etiquette, but you are strongly advised to switch the thing off for meetings, listen to your messages and don't programme it with an annoying or silly ring tone!

In the section above a number of production documents were introduced, useful information doesn't have to be a formal document. Below are a number of "communication tips" that can save you – and your colleagues a lot of time

- Always write down phone messages
- Speak slowly and clearly, and make a note of who you're talking to
- Always carry a pen and paper
- Read the instructions
- Carry a pocket torch
- Use white PVC tape and a marker pen to label patch cables, break-out ends, stage positions, desk channels, in fact just about anything
- Keep every receipt, delivery note, invoice, fax, spec sheet, plot and channel list you ever get. (These should be passed on to the appropriate person where relevant, usually the Production Manager)
- Remember all technical manuals, software upgrades, personality files and panic assistance can be found somewhere on the Net
- Ask, don't assume

Production Documentation

In a production of any scale, large amounts of paperwork are generated, it is beyond the scope of this course to examine all such documents in detail, but a representative selection is shown below. You should be aware of the importance of printed and written material, and the scope of subjects it covers. From channel lists to tour schedules you will often receive instruction in written form – this section will introduce the key document types and allow you to interpret them correctly.

Technical Specifications

Technical specifications relate either to the physical attributes and performance criteria of equipment, or to the requirements of a band or act so they can produce their show or event. In all cases tech specs *must* be accurate, detailed and concise. It isn't necessary to include every exhaustive detail, but sufficient information needs to be included so people involved with the show will be able to understand what is required and identify crucial elements.

Technical specifications for equipment should be readily available from manufacturers and suppliers. These will clearly show operating limitations and physical attributes and commonly method statements for the use of the equipment. When renting equipment it's well worth checking it can do the job you want, or actually includes all the things you take for granted. Does the stage you want actually come with steps, ramps and PA wings? Have you just assumed the FoH tower will turn up as part of the package? How much weight can you put on the stage? All this information needs to be gleaned and assessed before you can be sure it's the item you want.

If manufacturers or suppliers are unable to provide you with the relevant technical specification, you should think twice about using their services. Failure to inform you of hazards or limitations associated with technical equipment can place you in a very dangerous situation.

It will be more common for you to come across the Tech Specs for bands and artistes, than find yourself worrying over whether a certain kilo-Newton loading is actually sufficient for purpose. Tech specs generally form one element of the contract between an artiste and a promoter or booker. These statements of what is to be provided and by whom are generally referred to as Riders to the contract. Contract riders will normally contain three sections, or discrete types of information. Firstly there will be a general set of statements about hotels, dressing room, stage access time, sound-checks, payment arrangements and so on. These are important contractual elements for the band, and whilst it might not seem that important who is in which hotel, or how far it is from the gig, failing to resolve such issues can rapidly lead to major disputes.

The second section of a contract rider concerns food, drink and refreshments, (food and drink destined for the band is known generically as 'The Rider'). If you are living on the road the Rider forms a key part of the day's diet. It's quite common for people to think of the food rider as some kind of perk that the band get in addition to the performance fee. In some instances this may be true, but if you are living and working on the road as a tour technician, the food rider is quite literally bread and butter to you. Without it you simply wouldn't be able to operate. There are sometimes food requests that reflect religious beliefs – failing to spot these kinds of details might be the end gig.

The final element of contract riders is the technical rider – a list of equipment and spatial requirements for the band. These really must be as detailed as possible and include all the information required so a venue or festival can be prepared for the band's arrival. A typical tech rider will include a channel list, required FoH and monitor desk type, outboard effects required, and list inserts. This will allow venue technicians to prep in advance of the band arrival.

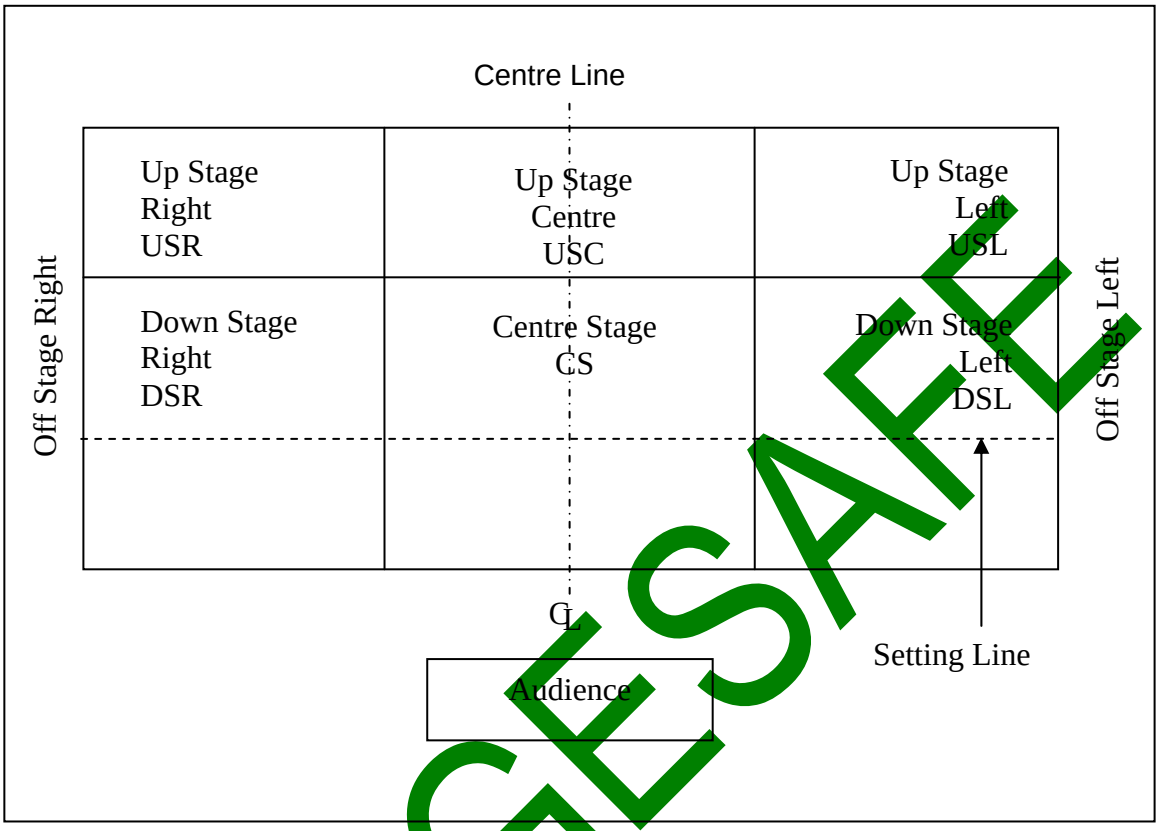
Some bands will make requests regarding lighting including specifying fixtures, colours, patterns and positions to be used.

Depending on the stature of the band a proportion of the technical, food and general contract rider will simply be ignored. Very few acts can practically dictate what they want from every venue or festival, but if you don't ask and ask very clearly you will never get. The great skill of the Tour Manager is to know what can be ignored and what requires a major fuss. Whatever the band you must always read riders carefully.
They may contain information such as "Do Not use Strobe effects during the show" – failure to note such a stipulation could be disastrous. If you are then one receiving the rider you will need to ensure that appropriate people in the production chain are informed, in this instance the House Lighting Op.

Maps and Plots

Plots and stage drawings are vital tools for conveying accurate technical data. Scale drawings will for the basis of stage and set construction plans as well as lighting plots and technical projections of the show. Make sure you are familiar with scale calculations, and know how to translate a measurement on a plot into reality on the stage floor. Theatrical drawings are generally 1:25 or1:50, in most instances the scale will be marked on the diagram. Multiply any measurement you make on the plan by this factor and you get how big things should be in real life. This is one area where the metric system comes into its own – you try working out how long a line 8 3/16th of an inch is from a 1:25 plot.

When measuring out a stage to place equipment or set, there are two lines used as datum lines from which all measurements are made. One is the Centre Line, which runs up & down stage right at the centre. It is usually marked on plans by the swirly letters CL. The Setting Line runs from stage left/right and is the furthest point downstage where action can occur. Measurements for items of set or equipment will be given in terms of distance right or left of Centre and how far upstage from the Setting Line. The standard stage layout is below.



If you have to mark the position of items such as risers that may move during a changeover, use white PVC tape and your trusty sharpie. This process is known as spiking. If told to "Spike and strike" you know to mark the item and remove it for later use. The easiest way to spike is to make a little right angle of tape on the floor at the downstage corners of the equipment. Write on the tape what the mark refers to. On a stage with busy turnarounds there could be dozens of spike marks.

Lighting plots will contain huge amounts of coded information, including the fixture required, its position in the rig, the colour it should be fitted with, orientation, circuit number, gobo and pairing.

During festival shows, the Stage Manager will generally receive a set of stage plans for each band. These must be interpreted and turned into practical schemes. Often during a turnaround there will be a ballet of moving risers, with instruments from the band just finished being replaced with those of the new arrival. Turnarounds are always highly pressured times. If you are working, make sure you know exactly what is required of you, and check for cables, connections, speakers and sound multicores before you move anything.

Remember, risers have brakes. Never plug or unplug equipment without permission, and LISTEN to what is going on before you get stuck in.

Mark on your stage plot what is going where and which risers need to be shifted first. On small stages with tight turnovers things can get fraught – especially with bands and managers desperate to get the show up. Make sure you are part of the solution, not the problem.

Production Schedules

A production schedule is a detailed document containing the timing for the delivery and installation of equipment, the preparation of the site, the appointment of staff and the undertaking of particular jobs or activities. Normally, it will be the Production Manager in consultation with specialists who will draw up the production schedule. Depending on the size and duration of an installation, the schedule may vary from being a single page of A4 informing of when lights and sound are getting in, the time of soundcheck and doors opening, right through to huge spreadsheets with cross-references across continents.

Whatever the scale and complexity of production schedules they share one important feature: they should be read. It will tell you what needs to be done, when and by whom. In construction and manufacturing there is an entire science called Critical Path Analysis, whereby the link of what needs to be done when, and what is the critical slowest element, is identified and analysed. Critical Path calculations inform every step of a large project. In our business Production Managers are constantly making Critical Path judgements, and this process finds physical expression in a detailed Production Schedule.

Tour Schedules

Planning for touring with a band and technicians is extremely complicated and long-winded, especially if the tour includes international journeys. Normally a Tour Manager will work with the band's management to develop an itinerary of concert dates. Once this is settled, travel and accommodation arrangements need to be made. This will include the booking of ground transportation for band, personnel and equipment, arrangements for flights, freight, carnets, visas, work permits and so on. Hotels have to be booked, fuel costs worked out and the financial arrangements for the tour worked through. This process will take considerable time and effort, and normally results in a printed Tour Itinerary.

The Itinerary will outline the activity for each day of the tour, listing the venue to be played, hotel, get-in, sound-check and show time, dressing rooms, travel arrangements and so on. Also listed should be contact numbers for venue, promoter and hotel. This allows friends, relatives etc to contact folk on the road. If no-one knows the number of the place you're staying; how are you going to get that important message?

Once on the road the Tour Manager will often produce a Day Sheet, outlining the specific arrangements for the coming day, which will include details such as press calls and departure times which weren't sorted for the initial Tour Itinerary. A hotel rooming list will usually be drawn up – often at the reception desk itself. If there are fifteen people staying in the hotel how will you be able to co-ordinate them without knowing where they are?

Legal Documents

It is increasingly common for legal documents to accompany tours, the LOLER Regulations demand this for all lifting and suspension equipment. It is unlikely that Production Technicians will take responsibility for generating LOLER or other legal documentation, but you should be aware of the importance of such paperwork.

Regulations demand that certain documentation, such as load test certificates, accompany equipment as it travels, should you have an inspection you may need to find this paperwork in a hurry. Be sure you know where it is and treat it with respect.

The same goes for safety signs and warning notices, these should not be interfered with, obscured or defaced. And they must be complied with.

Method Statements and Risk Assessments are drawn up to help you carry out your job safely and efficiently. Read them and make sure you follow their conclusions – failure to do so may mean you are committing a criminal offence.

Whilst not legal documents, there is a great deal of written information that can help you work more effectively, ranging from site maps to weight markings and equipment lists on flight-cases. Just as you should develop the skills of listening, so develop the defensive skills of looking and checking to protect yourself in a potentially dangerous workplace.