

THE BEST threads

MAKING CABLES: IS IT WORTH IT?

Looking at the process and cost in several ways

By The LAB Community

QUESTION POSTED BY DAN SCHMIDT

The band I'm playing with has been looking at the options of making cables to save cost and/or to make sure we have the lengths we need. Is this really a cost-effective solution, or is it just more hassle than it's worth? Also, what kind of cable would be recommended for a group that's on the road about two gigs a week?

REPLY BY ALEX S

It kind of depends on access to the raw parts. If you can buy in serious bulk, why not build? I worked with a sound reinforcement company that "built" everything we used, from microphone cables to 48-channel transformer/isolation three-way splitters. Anyone who used the gear shared the "pain" of soldering, stuffing and pinning. It made us all better system techs and kept our repair skills polished.

After all, when you're 500 miles from the shop, what good is a tech that can find a problem but is unable to repair it? Kept us busy during the slow times, too.

REPLY BY W. MARK HELLINGER

Cable building as an automatic default busy work project is O.K., but beware of busy work. Now it's one thing if it's a displacement of daytime television, but you have to remember this: If you're doing busy work, that work is only worth what it can be replaced for. It's too easy to fall into busy work ruts and slight what should really be done. Building cables is worth what - \$10, \$20 an hour? Landing work and filling the calendar is worth what - \$50, \$100 an hour?

Beware of activities that fool yourself and the crew into believing you're busy. Many employees will merrily work away at a project, costing the employer \$20 or \$30 or more an hour, and only put \$5 an hour worth of finished work in the pay pile. I'm certain there is more than one sound company out there running some \$100-plus 20-foot mic cables, with some big blank spots in the calendar. I'm one of them.

REPLY BY ANDREW S

I'm guilty of making almost all my own cables unless I'm in a bind. I'm cheap and want good quality. I used to buy some mic cables from a large manufacturer, and I really liked the cable. They also used standard Neutrik connectors. Now, I think they're using the solderless stuff, and I'm not as excited.

As far as cables with (Neutrik) NL4/NL8 connectors, I've found them to be very expensive to buy. I get a pretty decent price at my local dealer, and I paid about \$40 apiece for 25-foot NL4 cable. Considering NL4 connectors and the 12/4 cable can be had for about \$2 (not at my dealer), and 12/4 cable is about 52 cents per foot, the parts can be purchased for about \$15 or so. So, an extra \$25 to make a cable? I'd rather put that in my pocket. I can sit and watch *CSI* or *West Wing* while I build them.

REPLY BY ALAN H

Since many of us here get our cabling direct, it might skew the opinions... But, I can't see how making your own is worth the time and trouble. Fixing a cable here and there, or making something for a particular application, might be O.K., but trying to make your own 20- to 30-plus cables for a band seems like an awfully hard way to save any money.

Also, consider this: If one of the reasons it looks like you can save big money this way is due to bargain cabling or connector costs, make sure you're using good, dependable, flexible cable and connectors. You won't save anything by making a bunch of cables that turn out to be noisy, fail often, and/or are stiff to wrap (and lay badly on the stage for that matter). If you shop around and buy good cables, they will last and last. In the long run, what's an extra \$100 or so for 20 pre-made cables along with peace of mind?

And no burnt fingers, lost setscrews, ends soldered on before the shell is on the cable, etc.!

REPLY BY JESS BRUFFETT

If you can solder pretty well, then yes, it's very cost effective. A friend of mine even made his own snake, and it saved him about half. It would have cost him \$2,200 to buy the snake, and he bought the parts and the cable for his snake for about \$1,050.

REPLY BY BOB LEE

If you need an unusual length, or you need it in 15 minutes and a trip to the store would take 25 minutes (and, you have the materials at hand), sure - make your own cables. Otherwise, buy them. If the prices are outlandish, look around. If you've got a good relationship with your pro audio dealer, maybe they'll give you a discount. Cables are a high-margin item for retailers.

REPLY BY AL LIMBERG

It all depends on what your time is worth, and your skills. In the midst of winter, you bet! Things get a bit slow, and if I can't do some maintenance that requires appropriate temperatures and etc., then yes, I'll make cables. In the midst of the summer rush, the cash comes out and I buy them already made.

It depends not only on your soldering skills but also on your shopping skills. If you're stuck paying \$3.50 each for Neutrik NC3s, then don't waste your time. If you bother to shop and are able buy them at \$1.60 (and get similar savings on quality cable) then go for it. Even buying can be a hassle when your local dealer sells only lousy stuff with solderless, plastic-housing XLRs!

REPLY BY BRUCE GERING

It might be worth your while to make your own speaker cables, but as far as balanced cables go, find yourself a good, inexpensive source for quality cables.

REPLY BY RICH ZEI

I've always made custom cables for the back of racks and such. It helps to cut down the amount of CABLE-ETTI (new term!), and all in all, makes things easier to patch in/pack up. As for mic lines and such, I just buy 'em.

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focus
(v. to concentrate energy)

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