

BEYOND THE FIREWALL

How to select the right tools to advance efficiency and improve competitiveness.

By Carl Azar

Communication has always been critical to construction projects, but the faster pace of business driven by market pressures, schedule compression, and new project delivery models means that construction firms and their managers must shift from simple communication methods to more advanced team collaboration. Fortunately, substantial benefits can be gained from collaboration beyond the firewall, and a relatively small investment in collaboration tools—like those afforded by capable document management systems—can help deliver benefits that dwarf the cost of these business changes.

Other segments of the architecture, engineering, and construction (AEC) industry have significantly improved collaboration, making it a challenge for contractors to keep up with them. For example, architects and engineers can produce drawings quickly and accurately using electronic tools and can collaborate using shared tools to revise and approve designs. Many A/E firms share drawings and project information via online portals that streamline document sharing while preserving business security. These techniques improve business efficiency among the extended project team and ultimately improve firms' competitiveness and bottom line performance, especially in today's business environment. Contractors that embrace team-based collaboration will share these same benefits and stand to gain future business where collaboration is valued.

NOT JUST COMMUNICATING

The ease of creating digital project information in so many forms has led to an information explosion. However, more information is only useful if it can be used by the people who need it, when they need it, and in a user-friendly format. Then there is the issue of tracking and retaining the information as a business record.

Mail, faxes, and distribution of paper have long been used by contractors to communicate. However, simple communication methods like these tend to be one way, and they don't facilitate shared understanding and problem solving. Even telephone conversations, e-mail, and FTP sites don't often go beyond this basic level of communication. In contrast, collaboration tools securely transmit vital information while accelerating cooperative and immediate two-way, team problem solving. They also help enhance and automate the process of doing business while preserving documentation of business decisions for future use.

SUITE OF CAPABILITIES

What separates collaboration tools from simple communication methods? They both make sharing of documents and information



possible, but collaboration tools extend much farther. They are capable document management systems that typically include the following:

- Electronic versioning to ensure that the right version of a document is being used
- User- and role-based security to ensure that people access only the information they are entitled to see
- Tools to capture and manage documents from multiple sources, such as paper, fax, and e-mail
- Searching tools to immediately locate information based on its content

More advanced collaboration capabilities include business process automation via document workflows, formal records management to ensure retention of critical records for business or legal use, audit trails for reporting, Web-based access to enable participation outside the office, and integration with other business tools, with multiple choices offering some or all of these advanced capabilities, how should contractors select the right collaboration tool for their businesses?

FOCUSING ON USABILITY

The most successful collaboration tools have three key qualities. The "secret" is usability, and usability is generally defined to mean the following three things:

- The collaboration tool must be easy for people to use so that little or no training is required.

ABOUT the AUTHOR

Carl Azar is vice president of marketing and product development for ColumbiaSoft. He is an entrepreneur and business process expert with a professional talent for bringing new products to market that solve critical business issues. Azar's system architecture, engineering, and product marketing experience are the foundation of his leadership of product solutions and marketing at ColumbiaSoft. For more information, please visit www.documentlocator.com.

- It must work with other industry tools (the ones a company has).
- It must be accessible from anywhere team members will be working.

Unless the above three requirements are met, it does not matter how many features a collaboration tool has or how slick the user interface looks, because it won't get used.

In the construction industry, the time it takes project members to ramp up is overhead, which reduces profit. This is where practical trumps glitz every time. When evaluating software to solve a collaboration challenge, contractors should not focus only on an abundance of features. As they ask what the capabilities are, they should also find out how easy it is to use them. Try before you buy, or at least get a demonstration. If it is not easy to comprehend how to use a tool in minutes instead of hours or days, then employees, contractors, and clients will not want to use it.

For true cost-effectiveness, the collaboration solution should be additive in nature. It should "play well" with other industry software, preferably the software already in use, such as Microsoft Office and Outlook. Even better, it should be flexible enough that it can be integrated with other business applications, such as accounting, construction management, costing, bidding and estimating, scheduling, construction takeoff, design, and human resource (HR) tools. Of course, all of this does not have to be integrated at once. Managers should evaluate the out-of-the-box benefits of the new solution, and then consider integrating to their most-used business software.

Good collaboration eliminates the isolation of people, ideas, and information. If information is not received and recorded, it might as well not exist. The collaboration solution should allow people to access information via the Internet at any time and wherever they are, while at the same time maintaining security over information. Where the information resides is important; if a company hosts its own tools, it can stay in control of all project data without relying on a third party.

THE BEST OF ALL WORLDS

Ideally, a collaboration tool should provide audit trails to prove who said what and when. This helps with conflict resolution—another important factor to contractors in defending against claims and lawsuits. A searchable log of correspondence is critical to reducing risk; it is also critical for extracting information that helps contractors evaluate business performance and improvements.

Collaboration is ultimately about people, not tools. Collaboration tools should be as close to invisible as possible—they should work in the background and only make themselves apparent when they are needed. The technology should not define what a company does. Instead of tailoring a business to the technology, the technology should be tailored to the business.

Construction firms have a unique opportunity to change as their industry embraces collaboration tools to finish projects faster, with fewer errors and higher profits. Firms that invest in collaboration tools and change to a collaborative business mindset are poised to thrive, while those that don't may find themselves competing alone in a world of business partners driven by collaboration. ♦



BIG JOHN
Tree Transplanter Mfg., Inc.

Think BIG!
The next BIG thing in the Building industry.

Large Tree Transplanters from BIG JOHN
The future of any business is in growth.
Why not grow **your** business into moving large trees? Call us and let BIG JOHN show you how to become part of the Large Tree market place.

Big John Tree Transplanter Mfg., Inc.
Heber Springs, AR 72543 USA
800-643-8039 • www.big-john.com