

Beyond Email: The Case for Online Construction Management Services

By Richard Sampson

In an effort to reduce costs and improve productivity, construction C-level executives and other managers are increasingly looking beyond email to online (Web-based) construction management systems.

Online systems can significantly reduce workload and costs, and help users get answers to critical day-to-day questions faster, to help them move projects forward.

The most effective systems automate routine, repetitive tasks (e.g., RFIs and CCDs). Depending on the project's size, there can be several hundreds of these questions, answers and directives. The information is automatically updated online, keeping delays and potential cost increases to a minimum.

Effective systems also make it easy to monitor the cycle of approvals from the architect or designer to the contractor, helping identify delays.

Beyond Email

Many companies have postponed using an online system simply by using email. However, email has definite limitations when it comes to speeding up decision making, automating documentation and reducing costs.

- Emailed information can be out of date by the time it is received and cannot be updated in real time.
- A spreadsheet log that is attached to an email typically will not show the details and history of an item. Additional files that record details must be attached to the email or sent separately.
- It's often unclear whether someone has received the email. The onus is on the sender to assure the information gets transmitted, rather than on the receiver to make sure he or she sees the information.
- Email is often unreliable. Messages are sometimes undelivered and attachments are sometimes deleted or accidentally omitted from the email. Tracing and correcting these problems can increase the sender's workload and add to the uncertainty about whether the information has reached the recipients.
- Email can be slow. Corporate firewalls and higher priority email can significantly delay transmissions.
- Email is not always available (e.g., during a meeting). Access may be restricted to a computer that is already configured with the user's email inbox.

The Advantages of Online Systems

Given all that, many C-level managers are looking to online construction management services as a way to improve communication and increase productivity. They recognize the benefits of the better systems:

- New information (RFIs, CCDs, etc.) is added online and the corresponding logs are automatically updated making all the information available to users in real time.
- Everyone sees identical information. This can be particularly valuable in conference calls when users in different locations need to view information to make decisions. In such cases, new information can be added online, in real time, for everyone to see.
- Detailed information is readily available. Better systems allow users to easily toggle between an entry in the log and the detailed RFI, etc.
- Graphics and other supporting documentation are also easily available. The Web system can store updated progress photographs, CAD drawings, other non-text information and reports.
- The responsibility for the information shifts from the sender to the receiver. A Web system eliminates the excuse that “I didn’t receive the email.” It is up to the receiver to visit the Web site and see the information.
- System administrators can control different levels of access through passwords, helping assure only authorized people see particular information.
- Users can access information from any computer with a browser. This is not always the case for email.

Criteria for Selecting a Construction Management Service

In spite of these advantages, some C-level executives may be hesitant to try an online service, concerned about the potential need for training, initial loss of productivity, lack of privacy, and the risk of cross-communication and unauthorized approvals.

However, such factors need not be concerns if the service is simple, easy to use and focused.

Simplicity – The system must look simple and be simple to use. Although potential users such as mechanical and electrical contractors already access information from the Web, the general contractor’s field superintendents and foreman may be using Web technologies for the first time.

To be effective, all groups need to feel confident using the system. Field personnel must be able to put it to use immediately, inputting information with ease.

Ease of use – The system must be intuitive and easy to use. It must mirror the way the project team has communicated for years and not ask them to learn a new way to exchange information. It must employ familiar methods for formatting and presenting information.

If users can virtually teach themselves with little or no training, they are more likely to try using a system. If the system is complex, or uses unfamiliar ways of presenting information, the project team is likely to reject it.

Focus – A system should focus on the areas where it can make the most difference (e.g., routine, repetitive tasks such as RFIs and CCDs). The service can ignore – or link to – other applications that are needed less frequently (e.g., CAD drawings, CPM schedules).

A service that does a few tasks well is of much more value than one that does many things poorly.

Finally, the online system must preserve the private exchanges of information that occur between contractors and subcontractors or architects and designers. Better online systems have pre-set communication paths that users cannot change, thus protecting that privacy, avoiding cross-communication and preventing unauthorized approvals.

Summary

Online construction management services can now replace email as the primary means to communicate and document routine administrative processes.

The greatest efficiencies can be obtained by using online systems to automate the numerous exchanges of information essential to moving projects forward on a day-to-day basis.

Used properly, online construction management services have the potential to help reduce overhead, enhance productivity and improve bottom-line profitability.

About the Author

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