

Note: The author of this article, Brad Fouts, chose Construction Communicator, using the selection criteria he describes here.

The “Bottom-Up” Approach to Online Construction Management

Typically online construction management systems are set up from the “top” by the general contractor, architect or project manager, and then users (including subcontractors and design consultants) are added later. In some cases, subcontractors must take the initiative.

For example, Fouts Construction Services, Inc., Portland, Ore., an interior millwork fabrication and installation firm specializing in the construction of Native American casinos, did just that when faced with projects in multiple states.

Keeping up with the daily issues in different states can present a challenge. Project managers and superintendents often duplicated numbers for change orders, daily work orders and requests for information (RFIs), because they didn’t know that someone else had just used that number.

In January, Fouts started work on three casino projects in Washington and Idaho, which required a system to track each project separately; document RFIs, submittals and other contract administration for each project; and allow staff in the office and in the field immediate access to this information.

Each project had separate clients, architects and general contractors. Up to nine people per project needed access to the information. To be efficient, all these people needed to use the same construction management system.

Selection Criteria

In seeking a construction management system, identify specific features and determine exact needs. Some key features include:

- An easy-to-use online system that focuses on contract administration, RFIs, submittals and change-order requests;
- Simple set-up, requiring little or no time and expertise for companies without a computer staff person;
- An easy-to-learn system that requires little training;
- The ability to maintain privacy for subcontractors’ RFIs and correspondence;
- The ability to upload files to a secure online file system and control who sees which files (e.g., a letter from a subcontractor), and

- Tracking contract-administration items, allowing the general contractor and the owner's architect to access the system.

The Results

With the projects underway for about three months, more than 100 RFIs, submittals, change-order requests and other documents have been logged online. Responses from the general contractor or architect are also available online.

An added benefit is that this system doesn't need a high-powered computer and DSL connection. Entering and monitoring RFIs can be done from the field using a laptop computer with a cell-phone connection.

Overall Advice in Selecting an Online Construction Management Service

Be clear about what you want. Make a list of the three to five things that must be automated, such as handling time-critical paperwork that keeps the project moving forward on schedule. (A 100 percent paper process can really slow you down.)

Check a few systems to see if they are up to the tasks. Decide in advance what you're looking for. There are lots of online services out there; some do many different things, others do only a few things. Focus on the capabilities that will make the most difference to you.

Ask how the system can help you. In speaking with any sales representative, describe a typical project and ask what the system can do. This changes the conversation from a standard sales pitch to a problem-solving exploration.

Check on customization. If customization services are available, check the fee. Do not assume that "what you see is what you get." Ask if things can be tweaked.

Check whether documents can be uploaded. Having time sheets and daily job diaries available online, for example, is extremely convenient.

Check on the administrative matters. Ask the sales rep:

- What is the set-up fee, if any?
- What is the monthly subscription fee?
- What is the length of the contract?
- Can you see the license or contract?
- What technical support is available?
- Is there an extra fee for that support?

Take advantage of any trial periods. No matter how good the system demonstration might appear, test the system.

Take advantage of any training. Again, no matter how easy the system, employees can always learn something from a training session or a web conference.

Conclusion

Become actively involved in automating construction management. Perhaps the general contractor will provide a system that works. Unfortunately, many systems are very complex and can be more trouble than they're worth.

If you're facing that complexity, or if the contractors simply don't include your company in their systems, don't only rely on help from the "top." Do it yourself. A "bottom-up" approach can work well.

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About the Author

Brad Fouts is the owner of Fouts Construction Services, Inc. of Portland, Oregon.