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The Digital Workforce In Construction Is Here, Ready or Not

The construction industry has always been mobile. Project team members, scattered across disciplines and entities, often work remotely, whether at jobsites or while in transit between project sites and trailers or front offices. Sharing project information and tracking deliverables is always challenging. Due to the spread-out nature of project teams and their dependence on in-house software and document management systems, contractors often require a desktop or Internet connection to collaborate.

Keeping vendors, owners, architects, engineers and field employees up to speed is a momentous undertaking. There are more changes on jobs now than ever before, so there is a greater need for real-time information to keep everything moving smoothly.

There are an ever-growing number of construction companies leveraging cloud-based software solutions and mobile apps to provide the most up-to-date project information in the field. By moving project data out of internal systems and into the cloud, these tools create a shared workspace that users can tap into from any location. Project teams equipped with mobile devices (smartphones, tablet computers, etc.) can immediately access documentation and information, make updates in real time and share them with the entire team. They can manage work in progress and track material deliveries and use that information to adjust schedules as issues arise.

To make these digital workplaces a success, however, all team members must be willing to use them. In return, construction professionals who embrace these tools are building skills to advance in an industry that is rapidly adopting new technologies and methods. In addition, these companies are also attracting younger workers accustomed to working with advanced technology.

MAXIMIZING MOBILITY

The days of having to carry a briefcase full of folders are fast disappearing. Far more common, a superintendent can walk onto a jobsite and have access to everything he needs using his smartphone and iPad. The ability to take photos, send emails and texts, and share project information through a cloud-based project management (PM) platform is the new standard of efficiency. One example is being able to publish an RFI (request for information) or a change order and have the whole team receive it while on site.

There is a huge competitive advantage to those using a PM platform to complete administrative tasks as well as share real-time field-level data with project owners, architects, subcontractors, vendors and their teams. Team members record and track their work through the tool and because it is compatible with other systems used in the construction industry (like accounting software), they can manage risk and

financial reporting. Superintendents who don't take advantage of mobile technology often find they still have paperwork to do after they get home from a job.

Mobile apps increase productivity. They capture information easier and are faster at tracking performance. Employees can view a schedule, see how long it takes to complete a task and then create better estimates because of that. For submittals alone, time and money can be saved by not having to print anything. Consider the example of a concrete and bulk construction material producer utilizing a mobile app that allows real-time project information and quick communication. Contractors can see where trucks are at any given moment as well as how long concrete pours are taking. They can send mix or volume adjustments to dispatchers or submit new orders without having to pick up a phone. In addition, they are able to check the weather app and then decide whether trucks need to be rerouted or deliveries put on hold. Field supervisors like to use their PM app look at their historical data to see how products have been ordered in the past and fine-tune their processes.

PROS & CONS OF MOBILE TECHNOLOGY ON THE JOBSITE

Mobile technology increases productivity by eliminating time-consuming tasks, such as inputting project data via desktop computer, faxing or mailing documents, and placing lengthy phone calls with dispatchers, to name a few. Instead, it gives remote team members direct access to each other via cloud-based software and apps. On one hand, mobile technology allows users to digitally share information in real time, so they can work more efficiently. However, it's still important to build the relationships that make project teams and customers successful. The following are pros and cons of relying on mobile technology, as identified by the contractors in this article.

PROS

- Information readily available at your fingertips.
- Removes communication barriers; project information is shared immediately via cloud computing, from any location.
- Reduced need for time-consuming phone calls, faxes, mail service.
- Ability to upload and view digital files from anywhere.
- No need to print everything. Increases worker efficiency, productivity.
- Activities are monitored and analyzed in real time; processes can be adjusted, and issues are resolved before they cause project delays. Automates processes reducing need for unnecessary tedious tasks.

CONS

- Increased initial training
- Technology is less personal than phone calls and in-person meetings which needs to be balanced
- Some documentation doesn't translate perfectly to a tablet or mobile phone, such as blueprints.
- Younger users may not realize there are alternative methods, like "the old-fashioned way."
- Tenured workers resist new technologies.
- Automates processes; some workers will be asked to grow into other areas.

While there is never a replacement for face-to-face conversations, mobile technology untethers project teams, so they can share project details more efficiently in the field. Construction professionals who are willing to master industry-specific cloud-based solutions and mobile apps will be well-positioned to take their companies — and their careers — to the next level.

The industry is changing, so you have to keep up.