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Don't Wait for Problems to Improve Your Technology

Information technology often falls under the chief financial officer's responsibility at construction companies. This means that his or her decision on how to spend money on technology can directly impact a contractor's growth.

For a lot of construction companies, aging technology is often a problem, and one not noticeable until it causes an issue. In most budgets, technology is like a lagging indicator. Companies wait until there's a big pain point to actually bring on support staff causing you to get behind the eight ball.

It's vital the CFO or leadership at a construction firm knows how to talk to the IT department. A good IT staff is a great tool for advancement, while a poor relationship with staff is akin to a hostage situation — they have all the information and it's not always easy to get it from them.

Here are 10 questions that CFOs should ask about their IT systems:

1. How does technology fit into our company's objectives?
2. What is our company's willingness for change?
3. What in our business causes frustration?
4. What are our technology priorities?
5. What is our data strategy?
6. How can we distribute the cost of our technology investment?
7. How can technology improve our process?
8. How do we calculate preliminary ROI with a degree of accuracy?
9. What is the right technology to generate a positive return?
10. How do we evaluate our ROI after implementation?

Building a relationship with your IT team, whether they are internal or outsourced, can be the catalyst for positive change and asking questions like these help that process. While some companies or teams can fall victim to "shiny object syndrome," a functioning IT team can be the eyes and ears of the office, aware of the tech troubles that workers experience.

Thinking of IT as just phone and laptop repair experts not only diminish their role, it keeps companies from reaching their fullest potential. Today, every aspect of a job is impacted by technology, as smartphones and tablets dominate offices and jobsites. As a result, your IT team is the boots on the ground who know the pain points and needs of the entire workforce within a company. You need to mentor them on becoming architects of pain. Look for the pain, the pain is where the profit is.

Data strategy is one of the most important questions. *What is our data strategy?* Even being able to explain a strategy is not enough, each person involved in the strategy also needs to be able to show it.

Despite widespread use of smartphones and tablets, nearly half of the file and data sharing in construction is still done manually or via spreadsheets, according to respondents from recent studies. That opens the door for a large margin of error. The first step is collecting data in a digital form. Though many companies still cling to printed drawings or reports, that can lead to inconsistencies and is far more difficult to analyze. Companies should get started on collecting and sorting data sooner rather than later. Eventually, they'll need to do some more advanced data analysis. When that time comes, it's better to have a backlog of information to turn to.

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Admittedly, getting experienced or traditional workers to try new methods of data collection can be difficult. Often, field teams can be resistant to change when previous systems have worked. The key is to simplify the process for the team. Providing QR codes on site, for example, for workers to scan and open image-mapping applications on their phone, can be an easy way to teach a new practice and show the value to all team members.

Return on Investment is another critical question. Analyzing the return on investment for new technologies can be challenging, but here is a good rule of thumb: if the cost is returned within 12 months it is usually a good investment. Be it software or another solution, if, within a year, the company or IT team predicts a positive ROI, go for it.

The key to making a tech advancement or change is also to not expect a perfect result in the beginning stages. Learning to settle for good enough is a start. Once one improvement in a jobsite process or data management storage is made, it is easier to take the next. Focusing too hard on an immediate, perfect solution can result in "analysis paralysis."

Once a change has been made and the ROI is clear, it's critical to document it. Utilize video and simply using a smart phone to capture the old way something is done, and then the new method. Just documenting the improvement can show the value of new practices. When that's shared with the company at large, it's a lot easier to see why the improvements helped, and why it's important to always evaluate how your technology dollars are being spent.