

Using Web-Based Project Management Tools

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March 2006

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SUMMARY

Colette Adams from Boora Architects in Oregon describes the risks associated with web based project management and how to mitigate those risks.

KNOW THE ADVANTAGES

Information technology has become the price of admission to the practice of design for most architects and engineers. Today, use of computer-aided design and drafting (CADD) is a given for most design projects. According to a 1995 survey conducted by *Professional Services Management Journal*, the average architecture or engineering firm uses CADD on 90 percent of its projects, and highly productive firms use it on 95 percent. This represents a significant investment in acquiring hardware, software, and training. Now, as clients and contractors are joining in the technology boom, the expectations are greatly increasing. Web-based project management software is becoming the tool of choice for the technology-savvy.

The increased use of Web-based technology comes as a mixed blessing. On the positive side, it can reduce conflicts, prevent errors and omissions, improve design-team communications, and enhance design and analysis capabilities as well as data presentations. By putting RFIs, change-order requests, various decision documents, drawings, and other materials on these systems, all authorized members can see and respond to them. This facilitates quick and easy information access for those who need it. Web-based technology also has the advantage of saving paper, postage, fax calls, express-mail charges, and other expenses. The turnaround time for RFIs has improved dramatically as a result of these systems, some users say. Well-

organized information is easier to track, understand, and respond to. In addition, the systems track who is accountable for any particular response at any time.

KNOW THE RISKS—AND MINIMIZE THEM

Are you also aware of the risks? Talk to your client and contractor. Explain the risks and realities of Web-based project management tools. Take a moment to consider the liability issues and the steps to minimize those risks. Everyone needs to understand the benefits and limitations. By addressing the following issues, you should be able to use Web-based project management with confidence:

- Negotiate a solid contract! Be aware that electronic communication may create a contractual obligation between participating parties. Conduct all communications online with this thought in mind.
- Agree in advance what documents will be available on the Web site.
- Also, agree in advance on the hardware and software that will be necessary to access the posted information.
- If there is a dispute concerning Web site content, what court has jurisdiction?
- Will drawings get into the wrong hands and be misused? How will you protect them from unauthorized use and revision? Your professional-services contract should include a waiver and indemnity for claims resulting from unauthorized use of your electronic files or unauthorized changes. Your contract should state that all deliverables are instruments of services and remain your property. You may also want to add a provision that states that the sealed mylars are the actual contract deliverables and any copies on disk or posted to the Web site are for convenience only. Stipulate that in the event of a dispute, the mylars take precedence.

- Who owns the data maintained on the site? Who owns the Web site after the project is complete? A project participant who does not own the rights to the Web-based system may want to continue maintaining their own set of documentation as back up for what goes on the Web-based system.
- If the Web server goes down (or, heaven forbid, out of business!) and data is lost, who is responsible? What liability is there and to whom?
- How well protected is the data that goes into the site? How reliable is the firewall dividing access to the data?
- Don't put electronic seals and signatures on your electronic files. It is far too easy for someone to modify a file with your seal in it. Even worse, your seal could be copied and placed on another document.

It appears that information on Web-based sites will create a greater degree of accountability. These systems appear to facilitate improved communication and documentation that should also reduce the likelihood of unanswered issues causing delays and belated change orders. As a result, it is possible we will begin to see fewer claims.

Face it! We are in the electronic age and should accept the benefits and promises it has to offer. There's no going back! There will be problems and pitfalls along the way, but it should be worth the journey. It all comes down to client communication, a good contract, and common sense.

RESOURCES

More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic

- 10.02.09 Risk with IM & Camera Phones
- 10.01.02 The Paperless Office
- 10.02.06 Watch Your Language: The Risks of E-mail

For More Information on This Topic

See also "Using the Internet in Practice," by Paul Doherty, AIA, with Michael Tardif, Assoc. AIA, *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 13, page 392.



See also the 14th edition of the *Handbook*, which can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by email at bookstore@aia.org



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Key Terms

- Practice
- Business planning
- Quality control programs
- Risk management