The building industry in North America has been dead last to adapt to the new age of electronic project management systems. U.S. statistics reveal that the American banking sector spends approximately $35,000 per employee on information technology, compared to the paltry $800 annually spent by construction. That’s even less money than agricultural and fishing industries spend per employee on IT.

But that is about to change. Increasingly building project owners are demanding their contractors be IT smart. By now it’s no surprise to most big project management companies and large general contractors, but it is still news to subcontractors—many of which had better be prepared to take the technological leap if they want to continue to secure major contracts.

In Toronto there is a growing number of e-business companies tailoring their electronic management systems to the construction industry. Most, however, gear them to larger builders. One of the newest e-business firms in the city, eBuild.ca Inc., is targeting both big and small companies. “We understand that the market is 5 percent big guys, 95 percent small guys, so our focus is to get into all the markets,” says Patrick Armstrong, eBuild’s corporate development manager. An admirable objective, but it won’t be easy to reach the little guy.

What the company is doing is setting up alliances with a wide range of companies, including Toronto-based Mare1 Contractors, one of the largest drywall firms in Canada. If that alliance doesn’t address the needs of smaller drywall contractors, than eBuild is prepared to forge partnerships with other drywall firms to ensure that all contractors’ needs are addressed, explains Armstrong.

Nic Faienza, project manager of Granolite Company Ltd., says he’s been in discussions with representatives from eBuild.ca on how the EIFS/stucco industry can benefit from its online project management system. Explaining all the details of the system isn’t possible in this column, but the basic idea is that invited subcontractors would be able to access the general contractor’s bid documents online in real time. The collaborative system offers users immediate access to things like budgets, bid documents, project flow, tie lines and change orders.

It allows any contractor to set up his own internal secured project, inviting his own suppliers. The program would also offer complete audit trails, tracking, permission and security functions. The basic tools required are an Internet connection and a browser.

Another reason that smaller construction companies should consider boarding the electronic train is that the industry has become fairly document intensive. Rather than relay reams of material via fax and phone to various players in a project, through electronic project management systems a builder need only make a few clicks on a computer mouse and the information is transported quickly and accurately. In a nutshell, it streamlines the entire construction process in a real-time environment.

The cost of operating varies with the contract price. At eBuild, the price hasn’t been finalized (its system will hit the market in early spring) but Armstrong says it will be in line with competitive systems in Toronto that typically run from $50 to $150 a month per user. “It is not a big expense considering it accesses current data, eliminates errors and duplication and ensures all processes are integrated front to back,” points out Armstrong.

Faienza sees the time coming when many EIFS contractors in Toronto will have to jump into the IT game. The industry has worked hard to understand materials and how they act over the past decade or so; that increased knowledge has dramatically improved their lot. Now it is time to take a closer look at improving project management approaches through electronic medium, he suggests, because they represent the technology of the future.

About the Author
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