

Construction & Technology:

Three Emerging Errors to Avoid





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Some pairings are well-known and expected: peanut butter and jelly, salt and pepper, eggs and ham, light and dark, hot and cold but, construction and technology? The last pair is truly the proverbial odd couple. That is, until recently. It used to be that the construction industry was not friends with technology. After all, who has time to sit behind a machine that's not a bull dozer? There are jobs to cost, bids to place, crews to manage and materials to deliver. Alas, times they are a changin'.

Construction professionals have realized that through the power of technology, they can present more accurate bids, order materials from the field and receive updated CAD drawings in a flash. In an industry predicated on time and materials the potential time, money and energy savings are an obvious gold mine.

However, with all the excitement and newfangled-ness of it all, the industry has somehow let the horse out of the stable and a pattern of errors is starting to emerge. Here are the top three emerging errors:

3. Being bid-focused and not business-focused.

Old habits die hard and traditionally, construction companies have focused on landing and completing bids. They have followed a keep-the-lights-on-and-gas-in-the-trucks mentality and until now, that has worked. As the dynamics of the economy and the business world shift, GC's and Subs can no longer afford to focus solely on bidding. Construction companies are businesses after all. Business and operating plans are needed. Web sites and networks are now the norm. Broadband and VPN connections are all the rage. Estimating, accounting, facilities management and costing software are but a small part of the vast landscape that is technology.

The time has come to get rid of AOL, Hotmail and Yahoo! email addresses. Not owning a domain name for the company says two things about a business: a) it's not willing to invest \$9 a year to purchase a domain name and, b) it would rather have AOL or Hotmail on business cards its own name. Clearly, these are not great messages to send to companies that can write big checks.

Truth be told, many owners won't even accept a bid unless GC's and Subs are equipped to communicate with them digitally. Companies that refuse to step up and play ball won't even be given tickets to watch the game.

2. Putting the cart before the horse.

This is a challenge that finds its fault in both the technology and construction industries. At a recent conference focusing on technology and the construction industry, it was clear that technology vendors were pushing online project management while the Subs were still trying to understand the concept of using wireless PDAs. Clearly the two industries were and are not speaking the same language – at least not at the same time.

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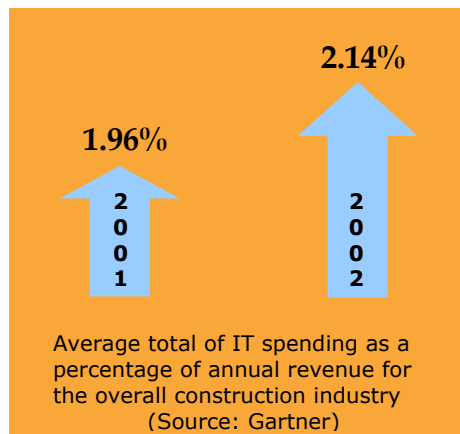
Technology has been slow to take hold in the construction industry and depending on who's speaking; the industry is either filled with slow adopters or cautious adopters. Either way, two things need to happen: technology vendors need to be sensitive to this dynamic by ensuring their conversations and recommendations include technology basics and/or construction professionals need to be empowered to put the brakes on technology initiatives if the return on investment is not absolutely clear.

Consider this:

- Plans for 'smart' buildings and structures are being made daily – if construction companies don't understand technology on a basic level, how can they be expected to effectively install it?
- Online project management is a great tool - assuming construction businesses can make full use of it with dial-up Internet access and outdated hardware.
- If this is the age of technology, how can a construction business engage in profitable marketing activities without a web site?
- Or, better still, how can large CAD files be received via email if the file size limits for AOL or Hotmail are miniscule? And, what of the ample 250-300MB of hard drive space required to simply install – not operate - CAD programs?

1. Failing to plan.

It's a tried and true adage – Failing to plan is planning to fail. In an industry that is very cost-conscious, the best way of reducing overhead, avoiding costly surprises, saving money and getting maximum impact from workers is through technology planning.



Technology plans are critical to an overall business strategy. Don't misunderstand, this is not yet another document created to sit on a shelf collecting dust but rather, a critical blueprint to help outline specific technology goals, budgets, present and future needs and even training. It will help decide and define what technology the business needs and when. Good technology plans also show how technology can be used to streamline tasks, achieve more with less and grow the business.

Technology planning is a relatively painless process that includes assessment, planning and implementation phases. This may sound like a lofty

pursuit best left to larger companies however, keep in mind that larger companies have budgets to absorb slip-ups and surprises – smaller companies don't. The average technology plan shaves 10% off a typical construction operating budget which means the cost of most plans pay for themselves well inside 6 months. With those statistics, can construction businesses afford *not* to employ technology planning?

These are just a few barriers of which construction companies should make themselves aware. There are many others lurking and waiting to strike the unprepared GC or Sub. Companies that fail to take heed and prepare to not just bid on jobs, but to run technology-enabled businesses, can expect to have the competition eating their lunch and landing their bids.

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