Online Project Management

Building Business Briefs

Whether you get everyone onboard or just link trades or homeowners to your systems, online project management puts the "co" in collaboration. Get project team members working together and you'll build smarter, faster, and more economically. You'll communicate better, too.

"In the past, I'd drive a half hour to the office to read job notes, then drive another half hour to the jobsite to post them," recalls Todd Wacome, president of Wynwood Associates. Since building his own project management Web site four years ago, the Andover, Mass.-based custom builder no longer schleps all over town to disseminate information.

Life is easier for Wacome and also for the production staff, trades, and home buyers who access his Web site (www.wynwood.net). They don't pester Wacome with frantic calls at odd hours about paint colors, change orders, or schedules. Everyone's got the latest information, and it's available 24/7. You can work this magic, too.

"Smart contractors use their Web sites as marketing tools by exposing aspects of their private sites to homeowners," says Joe Stoddard, an Elkland, Pa.-based technology consultant to the construction industry.

Think of a project management site as a bulletin board for sharing information among various parties. You can use security options to keep trades out of homeowners' business and vice versa. The benefits are multifold, and so are the options.

Application service providers (ASPs) lease suites of Web-hosted project management functions. They're handy if you don't feel like setting up your own system, but they aren't cheap (most charge a couple hundred a month). Given the nature of Web-based businesses, ASPs are questionably dependable in the long run. They're not the best bet for small- and mid-size builders.

Off-the-shelf project management software might be a better option. Quite a few programs, like Microsoft Project 2000, Primavera's Expedition 8.0, and Intuit's Master Builder, can be Web-enabled to share information with project team members out of the office.

For the ultimate company-specific solution, build your own project management site. You can hire programmers or consultants to do it, customize purchased

software, or use what you've already got. "Home builders often aren't aware of what they can accomplish on their own for a fraction of what the ASPs charge," says John Barrows, a Wainscott, N.Y.-based custom builder and remodeler who coaches contractors on technology.

It's easy to save existing documents as .html documents (check your office software literature if you're not sure how). You can then upload them onto the Internet. Online accounts cost so little these days (basic ones hosting Web pages run about $20 a month) you'll pay peanuts for a project management tool.

At the very least, Stoddard suggests putting the following elements online: change order documents, jobsite photos, and plans that can be downloaded in .pdf format. "It doesn't take a lot of technology to do this," says Stoddard. "Anyone with a copy of [Microsoft] Front Page can set it up. The 'Net provides a way to centralize it."

Regular updates are crucial for effective online project management. Putting everyone on the same page saves time as well as money, since there are lots of soft costs (and headaches) associated with untimely information.

Atlanta-based John Wieland Homes gets a lot of mileage from the Jobsite module of its project management site. The application tracks a job from point of sale through completion, allowing management and production personnel to view its status in real time.

Wieland's site also contains selection and scheduling info, which the builder updates daily. "Previously, our trades had tons of input from lots of our builders in the field," says corporate production manager John Ulsaker. "Now it's one-stop shopping to get their schedules."

Online project management also leverages relationships. Arlington, Texas-based Choice Homes runs a site that lets supers authorize payment for trades and suppliers from the field. "We're able to pay them faster, which generates a more loyal working relationship," says IT director Andrew Brimberry.

Wynwood Associates' online efforts cultivate loyalty, too. Extensive job notes on the company's public access Web site have turned waffling prospects into clients. "It's bridged the gap for people who might not have been confident we'd do a good job for them," says Wacome. "When they see the site and the level of detail, they know we will."

You don't have to get fancy right away. As with any other business procedure, it's best to assess your needs and implement online project management gradually. The main thing is to start somewhere. "I tell guys in seminars, 'Use e-mail and publish photos, because that's live,' " says Barrows.

And remember to tap the resources you already have. "I resent companies that imply you can't do project management without them," says Wacome. "Most people don't realize how powerful their browser is until they take advantage of it."