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An ounce of prevention can be worth \$15 billion: Why not archive as you go along?

vg Victor Gomez



Dataflow

The construction project you have been managing is finally done. Your trailer, home away from home for two years, is about to be carted away and you've been reassigned to another project. Only one detail left: close-out. Gather and hand over to the owner: specifications, E-mails, project correspondence, meeting minutes, as-built drawings, warranty documents, operation manuals, coordi-

dination drawings, commissioning documents, FF&E's, etc.

The building owner—a school district, a developer, the company that will occupy the shining tower you have built for them—will need these documents to operate the facility for the next 30-odd years. When their O&M staff needs urgently to find the shut-off valve to the second floor ladies' room, it is your information they will rely upon. When the HVAC roof-top unit malfunctions, they will rely on the warranty documents you gave them to get reimbursed for repairs. Because just over 80% of a facility's cost over its lifetime is in maintenance, and relies on documentation, the owner is counting on you to have all documentation ready, complete and available.

The number and variety of documents that are typically included in a close-out package is daunting. They

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are also located in disparate places: architects, engineers; subcontractors' offices and trucks; the trailer; computer hard drives; thumb drives and CD's; the reprographer's shop, etc.

Finding these many needles in as many haystacks means the forager needs to know hay from hay. Among the mountains of paper and terabytes of files, what is important to keep?

What is the most recent version? What is the builder's proprietary information and doesn't belong in

the package? Then it all needs to be catalogued, organized, archived. The need for a discerning professional eye means close-out cannot be handed off to a lower pay grade. Yet, just when you need them, the skilled admin., the summer intern and you have already been reassigned.

More to the point, your company will not get paid in full until you

deliver. What seems during the bid phase of the project like a distant event, a coda; an afterthought, could now have some measurable consequences for your career and for your company.

You, the proud negotiator who squeezed every fraction of a penny out of every nook and cranny to bring the project in on time and on budget, are about to get the haircut of a career. It was a \$20 million project, and you are owed 50% upon completion. If close-out delays payment by a month, that would be equivalent to a \$10 million loan at your COF, or roughly \$67,000 in TVM to you, at 8%.

Until recently, the real costs (which trickle down to the owners) and moral wear and tear associated with closing out were considered an inevitable part of construction. Indeed, a 2004 National Institute of Standards and Technology study showed that owners and operators needlessly bore \$15.8 billion a year in additional costs due to the highly fragmented nature of the industry, our continued paper-based business practices, and inconsistent technology adoption among design, engineering, facilities management and business processes.

Is it not ironic that nowadays practically all construction documents begin life as digital files, yet at close-out time they reappear in paper form, often to be scanned back to PDF to deliver on a disk? Why not gather the information digitally as it is produced—as the architect completes a drawing, as a submittal is approved—and print only what is needed, when it is needed? Why not archive as you go along?

Fortunately, construction document management technology exists to capture and archive documents as they are produced. When the project is ready for close-out, all relevant documents are there: complete, organized and searchable. They are then written to disk in a searchable format, including text documents as well as job site photos, video files, and audio recording from meetings.

While the technology exists, relatively few projects in upstate New York are actively taking advantage of it. We continue to use obsolete, inefficient processes hallowed by time and consecrated by practice focusing on the minuscule cost of maintaining a central digital repository through the life of the project, in denial about the potential \$67,000 a month down the road.

Back to you, in the trailer. Now the dreaded project close-out is here. Once again, you are not prepared. You hear mom's voice in your mind. She said it a thousand times, didn't she? "An ounce of prevention ..." She is as right today as ever.

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