THE PAPERLESS CONSTRUCTION COMPANY

ESA E-Software Associates Inc.

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The construction industry has relied heavily on paper documents for generations. Drawings, proposals, invoices, schedules and estimates that drift between the field and the office lead to an ocean of paperwork that becomes increasingly difficult to navigate.

Even as they wrestle with reams of paper, construction companies are facing increased pressure to do more with less to stay profitable, says Joel Hill, chief technology officer at eSoftware Associates. "As you try to be more competitive, the world's getting faster. You have to be quicker and more consolidated to execute and be profitable, and going paperless — even if it isn't 100 percent paperless — is a good step forward."

At eSoftware Associates, we've been proudly finding innovative solutions to help construction companies become virtually paperless since 2009. This guide will walk you through how you can use custom software to transform your company, streamline your processes and increase your team's productivity and ability to focus on your core business.

DETERMINE WHAT'S HOLDING YOU BACK

Chances are, you either suspect it's time to make a change or you've faced a disruptive event that has forced you to look at the way you do business. Think about your operations and what slows them down. Are people scanning field reports or entering them manually? Are managers carrying around project binders and still lacking all the items they need to solve problems in the field?

For Current Builders, a construction company in Pompano Beach, Florida, the problem was simply paper — lots of it. Like many construction companies, it kept duplicate files — one for the office, and one for the jobsite. It archived boxes of files for 10 years, the statute of repose for construction files. "On an average job, we might have 10 or 11 boxes," says Charlene Faber, chief operations officer at Current Builders.

After the company completed a large project on the West Coast, 36 boxes alone were sent back to Florida for storage. "At that point I said 'Wait a minute, this is insane,'" Faber says. "We had been talking about going paperless and creating a shared environment for information that we could all get into. This was the catalyst — with 36 boxes from the field alone plus what we had at the office, it was time to really take a look at what we were doing."

You may see other red flags that mean it's time for a new system:

ADMINISTRATIVE BOTTLENECKS

Between business administration and project management, it's impossible to avoid spending time and money on filing, tracking, submitting and billing. But if you find yourself holding multiple meetings in an effort to address administrative bottlenecks or find that employees are spending dozens of hours a month collecting data and generating reports, it's time to look for a solution.

EXPLOSIVE GROWTH

Growth is a good thing, but it can exacerbate your paper problem. As your company grows, there may be processes that simply aren't able to grow with it. Those in the office and in the field may find themselves struggling with more paper than usual as the company becomes more successful, which can ultimately undermine growth. Processes slow down, people lose sight of details and the possibility of error skyrockets.

"We've had clients where literally filing cabinets full of approved work that needs to get done are sitting there, and no one knows what to do because it's all on paper," Hill says. As the pipeline gets clogged with orders and forms, a company's newfound momentum can quickly be in jeopardy.

LACK OF BUSINESS INSIGHTS

Many construction business leaders feel as though they're working in the dark when it comes to data analysis. In most cases, they're sitting on mounds of data about how their process works and who's the best for each position, but they just haven't had the time or capability to analyze it. Gathering and compiling the information manually would take more time than your team can spare, but at some point, you can't afford not to try.

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>
> **– JOEL HILL**
> Chief Technology Officer at eSoftware Associates

REVIEW YOUR EXISTING PROCESSES

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– CHARLENE FABER
Chief Operations Officer at Current Builders

At this point, it's time to dig into how your company works and how your processes work. At Current Builders, Faber says, they established a committee with people from each department to look at how documentation was managed across the company. Amid the move to a paperless environment, the company's project management software solution was also becoming unwieldy, so Current Builders was looking for a way to update it too.

Whether you put together a committee or leave the work up to a few company leaders, here's how to ensure you get all the information you need:

TRACK AND RECORD

Pay close attention to the invoices, diagrams, work agreements and contracts, centralizing submittals and documents that your staff, clients, regulators, auditors and other outsiders use regularly. Who is the source of the information in them — field employees, vendors, the home office? Who approves and retrieves files? Which items are templates and which are unique? How do they flow through the organization?

LOOK AT HOURS

Consider instituting a time tracker for a period to identify where people are spending their time. Routine tasks like copying and pasting information, filing documents, following up on orders, chasing people down for signatures, composing common emails or wrestling with spreadsheets add up quickly. Finding out where people spend their time can highlight areas where automation and paperless work could make a big difference.

BE OPEN TO POSSIBILITIES

One of the most important steps at this point is for stakeholders to understand the possibilities that moving to a paperless office can bring. It's easy to identify the obvious: not having to store boxes of documents, saving time and so on. But with the customization available with cloud-based software solutions dedicated to reducing paper and improving data management, the possibilities for reporting, tracking and analytics are almost limitless.

PREPARE FOR CHANGE

It's a big benefit to go paperless, Faber says, but she does warn that it's a huge undertaking, and that the dynamics or culture of your company will help guide the process. "You've got to have total buy-in from the top all the way down. It's a companywide commitment, but it's well worth the investment."

You're going to have to sit down and look at your entire company, Faber says, and that could highlight issues you didn't know you had. "But as you get knowledgeable about the inner workings of the platform, your creative wheels start turning," she says. "It's a process — do your homework, and then strap on your seat belts, because it's fun."

DESIGN AND BUILD SOLUTIONS

After you've identified what you'd like to improve, it's time to develop a solution. There are plenty of companies out there with turnkey software that they claim can be tailored to fit your needs, but what ultimately happens is you end up with a system lacking all the features you want while obtaining other confusing features that are unnecessary for your business — and that you might be stuck with forever.

The best approach is to develop a custom solution for your business that integrates with your existing products. Working with a custom development team that specializes in each Microsoft tool will get you the exact services and solutions that look and work the way you want.

Keep in mind that these custom applications aren't just for big companies. They can be developed for businesses of any size. And with the help of a knowledgeable professional development team they can be scalable so that they grow and adapt with your changing business needs.

"We didn't know what we didn't know," Faber says. Her company had been using SharePoint and was trying to find a solution for an Excel document within the SharePoint platform when it came to eSoftware Associates. And while Current Builders is still working through the process, the changes are already worth it, Faber says.

"It's funny, our accounting manager was in our office the other day and she said, 'Is it me, or is it us?' She has so much more time available now that we don't print things. We've increased revenues by probably $25 million without increasing office staff at all. We've made huge savings in time, efficiency and overall cost of paper alone."

CONCLUSION

Going paperless is an achievable goal for construction companies of any size. The potential savings in time, money and effort in the field and at the office are significant. "Before we were paperless, we were going through probably 10 cases of paper a week," Faber says. "Going paperless has meant huge savings in our office supplies alone."

But the savings don't stop there. With more efficient processes, increased accuracy in record-keeping and improved customer service, you'll notice a difference in time, effort and the bottom line. Over time, a customized solution can grow with you and carry your company forward into the future, adding capabilities such as analytics and process improvements that will help you streamline your business and keep it running at top efficiency, no matter how big it is.