

## Should Information Technology have a seat at the table?

The world of blueprints and models is fading. How are you responding to the new AEC industry standards for business?



### > IT Matters

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The question that serves as the headline for this article

is becoming more and more relevant as Information Technology proliferates through all phases of business in the AEC industry. Long gone are the days of drafting tables, the wonderful bleach smell of fresh blueprints, fax machines as the major vehicle for transporting information, and hand-made project models. The AEC industry today is ruled by smart- this, 3D- that, Laser- this, virtual- that, and these technologies are evolving daily. Are you keeping up or being left behind?

By analyzing a few key success factors, the value of an IT plan should be evident:

■ **Employee work/life balance.** Providing adequate remote access capabilities to allow staff to communicate and complete work effectively when pulled away from the office.

■ **Competitive differentiation.** Creatively applying software technology, along with a comprehensive system environment, to produce high-quality work more efficiently.

■ **Collaboration.** Building an advanced network infrastructure and centralized information center that allows for a smooth flow of information, and helps create collaboration among team members. Taking advantage of BIM and PID, visualization, and other design technologies to identify issues in the design phase thereby avoiding major expenses and time loss during construction.

■ **Communication.** Giving staff all the communications tools they need to follow strict responsiveness guidelines—no excuses for lack of communication.

As architects and engineers we deal in rules, but it can be very difficult to keep pace with technology when the rules that define it are constantly being rewritten. Still, we should all realize the need to embrace IT and incorporate it into our business plan.

A few years ago I was speaking with the principals of an architecture firm about project collaboration issues they were having between offices. Their viewpoint was made quite clear when they told me that unless you were an architect, you would never have a seat at their table—meaning IT would never be given a high priority. More recently I spoke with someone from this firm who said that they still were not giving IT any priority and were subsequently losing clients, as well as some of their best design staff. Work was often completed late and over budget, so clients started looking elsewhere, and the internal staff was completely unmotivated because their cries for new workstations and updated technologies were not being answered. On the flip side, firms that are consistently receiving accolades in our industry unanimously cite IT as a key driver in their success.

I've spoken before about the "language barrier" between business and technology, and also the synergy that must exist

between the two to make any investment of time and capital worthwhile. Your company's translator, or IT decision maker, must have a unique set of competencies—both business and technical. In addition to knowing the core business services you provide, they must understand the economic and other external factors that influence the industry. They must also understand the workflow of your projects and have the ability to identify inefficiencies and collaborate with the staff. On the technical side specific certifications are not as important as a working knowledge of the "technology profile" of the firm, as well as an understanding of the IT landscape as a whole. The ability to communicate bi-directionally and to integrate technology successfully by gaining buy-in of the staff is a quality of a leader.

The AEC industry is evolving around Information Technology and rightfully belongs at the forefront of business planning and operations. So, in this sense, IT certainly belongs in the boardroom, but be sure that the person you have representing IT at the table has the leadership qualities described previously as well as the ability to represent the firm within the industry. ■

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