

## Going Digital Gives General Contractors a Better Way to Distribute Drawings to Subcontractors and Gives Subs an Easier Way to View Them.

The whole notion of construction planrooms in this country has been around just about as long as the country itself. As far back as post-Revolution, a designer would draw a plan, put it in a library, and builders would come to look at it. Sound familiar? That library room became what we know as a planroom.

While the ability to print in volume represented a pretty good jump in technology back in the 1980s, things around planrooms stayed pretty much the same for a very long time--subcontractors had to sift through mountains of project drawings before submitting a bid to the general contractors on projects that interested them. All of that changed somewhere around mid-'90s when the Internet emerged on the construction scene. With the Web's arrival, an industry that grew up on paper had a shot to go digital. Conceptually, online planrooms would allow owners, architects, and GCs to distribute project information to subcontractors, suppliers, and other members of a project team via the Net. Going digital would give GCs a better way to distribute drawings to subcontractors and give subs an easier way to view them. Problem was, and still is to a lesser degree, technology runs a lot faster than the construction industry.

The first form of electronic transfer of project plans involved e-mail, but most subcontractors found it difficult and confusing to deal with it. Without the latest CAD software or viewer, users couldn't open the files. And those who could view the files didn't have the proper equipment for printing the documents. The virtual bridge from bricks and mortar to the Internet was paved by online planroom networks. With cutting-edge firms like On Center Software supplying a sophisticated but easy-to-use plan viewer and Online Plan Service providing access to the necessary computing power and robust networks, online planroom networks enabled users to simply log in and find jobs digitized, organized, catalogued, and synchronized on the site. And once there, browse projects, browse documents, and download whatever they want. In a nutshell, the service enables GCs and their subs and suppliers to share and distribute project information, including plans and specifications, and reduce the cost of distributing paper plans and specs across a project life cycle.

A digital replication of what had been going on for generations with previously unimaginable efficiency. As a fascinating, and perhaps unintended, consequence of this leap in information technology, associations and planrooms became more relevant than ever. Technology didn't kill the model, it only made better. Yet, at this hour, it's fair to say that online planroom networks have only scratched the surface with contractors. For any number of reasons, not least of which a general discomfort with certain technology, a good number of GCs have resisted the move to online. You don't have to wander too far to hear someone wishing for the days of paper.

It's reasonable to think that contractors who don't want to spend money on software (most of whom have pretty nifty budgets for their trucks) simply don't see the value in it. They haven't made the correlation yet that the efficiencies of digital planning--things like the ability to quickly make changes to the estimates, the easy migration of estimating to project management, not to mention the reduction in time driving around to obtain project information--roll straight to the bottom line. They don't see the power in front of them.

But in a marketplace where there's immense pressure to reduce costs and improve organization, the use of online planrooms is bound to become more and more prevalent. What's not to like about increased bidding efficiency on new projects, easy access to all project information throughout the life of the project without ever leaving the office, exposure to new contractors bidding new projects, instant e-mail notification of changes to existing projects, and quick downloading of construction plans and specifications? In a word, nothing.