

Big Savings with Electronic Print Distribution?

By DeWayne Adamson

The rapid infusion of technology in reprographics has made a big impact on the document delivery system. Where once copies of plans were mailed to local reprographic centers, then sent over night to subcontractors, a process that was costly and time consuming; innovative, cutting-edge technology is now the standard.

Through these technological advances, reprographers can be the centerpiece that leads to increased profits. An "online plan room" is just one example of how a contractor can upload and distribute a set of plans in a quicker, secure process. An online plan room enables the centralized organization of project plans, revision tracking and control, digital archiving and document storage. Traditional in-house reprographic methods require too much time and energy which can distract a company from focusing on their core business.

However, with technology comes a certain amount of risk. The introduction of CD's, DVD's, portable USB drives and PDFs have indeed eased the process of transporting, sharing and archiving a set of plans; however, subcontractors will agree that it is very difficult to make a firm bid off of a 17" monitor.

There is a growing trend to distribute time-sensitive plans to subcontractors on CD's, email or FTP. At first glance this seems like an efficient alternative to hardcopy distribution, however, a closer examination reveals some inherently flawed issues with transporting blueprints via these methods without proper controls.

The cost of using CD's is roughly \$25, plus shipping. One of the risks of doing business like this comes in the form of corrupted files, pages missing and files that have not been converted properly. Another is the burden now placed on the subcontractor to now deal with getting a set printed to do the estimate. At least one day has now been lost and additional cost placed on the sub. This typically results in a less than optimal bid. If the subcontractor is willing to go through this process, he would probably be even more receptive to buying plans direct out of a plan room saving everyone time and money.

Recent industry articles point to contractors saving big money by using electronic in-house methods for plan distribution. Future articles may be written on the dangers of using these practices and the lessons learned by those who failed. Document management and the tracking of the distribution, revisions and addenda is an expertise that very few contractors have the capacity to do. Ad hoc FTP sites, manual CD distribution and e-mailing files is not only costly up front in terms of time and sub cost, but also could open up the potential for legal claims down the road, not to mention less volume due to winning less work because the best subcontractor bids went to the other guy.

Subcontractors that receive digital files from any of the methods mentioned without proper controls inherent in a plan room with a digital processing department that has reporting functionality could receive files that have an AutoCad layer turned off, a font wrong, a file corrupt or a page missing. When a sub has an extra half way through the project because he claims he didn't have all the files or information, the general contractor and owner has an uphill battle trying to resolve the claim as they have no proof of what was delivered. Insurers will punish contractors and owners in the form of higher bond premiums when proper document controls are not used.

We operate in an environment of speed where methods are constantly changing. The internet is the way for contractors to be engaged and increase productivity. CD's and DVD's are nice to listen to music or watch movies on.

DeWayne Adamson is a former national general contractor and the founder of Plan Express, a Memphis based, full service document management, printing and logistics company named by Inc.com as the fastest growing private quick-printing company in the nation.