

Huddled over a computer for what seems like hours, three construction engineers are engaged in a debate over how to get the expensive new software application that the company just purchased to create a report needed for a job meeting that is starting in 20 minutes on the other side of town. None of the three have ever attended a training course on how to operate the software. Both the senior engineer that is the resident expert and the individual that convinced the operations manager to purchase the system are on vacation. Unable to decode the techno jargon in the documentation, desperation takes hold and every possible button on every window is clicked with the hope that a miracle will happen and the computer will just print the report, which contains information needed to determine the proper course of action crucial to the outcome of the project. As the frustration turns to anger, an office assistant can't help but overhear the colorful phrases used by the engineers to describe the uncooperative software and inquires about the problem. It turns out that the assistant has a friend in another company that uses the same software application and offers to make a phone call to see if the mystery can be solved. After 5 minutes on the phone being coached by the assistant's friend, the elusive report is finally printing. Fortunately for the three project engineers, the friend's company had the wisdom to invest in training for their employees that have to use software as part of the business operations.

The above scenario plays out daily in companies around the country, but most of the time that friend is not there to lend a hand at those critical times. If a project team is expected to learn a software program on their own *while* running a job, the productivity of that team **will** suffer. This is where training comes in to play.

Software is no different than any other tool or piece of equipment that contractors use to deliver their services. Just like any piece of construction equipment, software should be maintained per the manufacturers schedule and users should receive proper operational training in order to realize the maximum productivity benefits. It would be foolish for a contractor to turn over the operation of an excavator or crane to an untrained or novice operator and expect the same productivity and quality of work that would come from a highly trained and seasoned equipment operator, yet many construction companies do just that with the operation of expensive software.

As a provider of construction software applications, we see many ad-hoc approaches to software training by construction companies. Most of these are a based on time and cost and therefore rarely produce the desired result of having proficient users. In the long run the time and money lost learning an application through trial and error will far exceed the cost of a structured training course.

Some very common quotations that are indicative of flawed reasoning include:

“We just hired a new employee that used the software at a previous job and that person is going to train us how to use the system.”

-Was that new employee hired to train the staff on how to use construction software? Many larger contractors do have corporate software trainers on staff, but relying on employees with other responsibilities to be resident software trainers will more than likely just produce an overworked employee and a group of novice users.

“I know the training course is 3 days, but we can’t have our people away from their projects for that long so maybe you could give us a condensed 1 day class.”

-Companies that develop software also understand that delivering a structured training course is fundamental to their applications being successfully integrated into an organization. These courses are usually developed from the real world scenarios and specifically address solutions to problems for which the software was initially purchased. If some functionality is skipped over or not entirely explained, eventually the end users productivity will suffer.

“We are going to install the system and play with it a little to see if we can learn how to run it on our own. If we need some help, we will call the support number”.

-This approach is the worst case scenario and will almost always transform “Software” into “Shelfware”. There is always a fair amount of hold time on any technical support line and most support technicians are not telephone trainers. It is unrealistic to think that telephone training will lead to anything but inconsistent operation, lost productivity, and unpredictable results.

Software is an increasingly important tool to effectively manage any construction organization. While spreadsheets and office applications may dominate the bulk of information management within an organization, more and more construction companies are investing in software programs that provide solutions to specific needs. Applications that are used for estimating, scheduling, project management, document management and other operational areas of construction organizations are more readily embraced and are typically part of the tool set used by construction professionals in their daily course of conducting business. Those that successfully implement such solutions will agree that the productivity benefits realized by implementing software applications around standard processes are vital to business success. A vital component of these successful implementations is a comprehensive employee training program. Without proper training to facilitate a good understanding of the operational functionality by end users, software applications are little more than books and plastic on a file room shelf.

For every dollar spent on construction software, licensing and maintenance, two to three dollars should be budgeted for implementation services that include installation, configuration and end user training. While this number may be costly when the software price is in the thousands of dollars, it is considerably lower than a \$5 to \$1 services to software ratio that other industries expect to spend on enterprise software solutions.

So at the end of the day it really comes down to this: Which would you prefer? 3 to 4 days of training to realize the maximum benefit of the software investment, or a couple of highly paid engineers standing over a computer pushing buttons and hoping for the desired results?

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