



Collaboration: the Clark & Fenn Skanska view

The electronic generation of information, combined with growing internet access, has meant that data is increasingly being distributed electronically. Telex and fax are now 'old hat'; we have moved on to email and, since the late-1990s, web-based collaboration platforms (or project 'extranets') have been used to manage construction drawings and documents, plus contract management, tendering and other processes.

An extranet provides a single, secure repository of all documents and drawings and related communications concerning a project. Authorised users, no matter where they are based, can access and comment upon the latest project information from any computer equipped with an internet connection and a standard web browser.

When these applications first emerged, they tended to be used mainly by the core project team – the project manager, designers, cost consultant and

Construction collaboration technologies (or 'extranets') are increasingly used on UK projects, but the specialist contractor can sometimes be left out of key decisions. Here, Specialist Building Finishes talks to an experienced user at Clark & Fenn Skanska to find out more

main contractor – involved in the pre-construction phases, but today extranet deployment often extends down the supply chain and throughout the construction process.

Some suspended ceiling and drywall specialists routinely use extranets. Staff from Clark & Fenn Skanska, for example, have used BIW's construction collaboration platform on more than 20 projects since 2001, including new office developments, office refurbishments, shopping centres, a PFI hospital, a landmark London store, and a major casino project in Coventry.

'Like most specialists, we don't have much choice,' says design manager Jan Brajerski. 'Our contracts will state that information will be exchanged this way instead of using paper – and at any one time we might

be using three or four different systems; we use BIW most, but also 4Projects and Buzzsaw, among others. This can complicate things, particularly as some systems are less intuitive to use. However, systems like BIW employ easy-to-understand Microsoft-style icons that soon become familiar.'

Attitudes and infrastructure

Some of Jan's colleagues were initially worried about openness: 'People who may have spent 20 or 30 years working with traditional paper drawings and specifications can be concerned that it's all a bit Big Brother, a bit too transparent,' he says.

Jan has also had some connectivity issues. 'All data is managed in a remote data centre and accessed via the web, and – particularly in the early days – we had problems with slow download speeds. Users accessing the system through a corporate network may be competing with hundreds of colleagues to use a limited amount of available bandwidth.'

However, it's not just corporate networks. 'With one system, the data centre was in California and speeds slowed to a crawl when the USA came online,' Jan recalls. 'Also some drawing formats cause

problems – plotfiles are difficult to deal with compared to DWFs, PDFs or native CAD files.'

For Jan, the benefits of online collaboration are clear. 'They provide a complete online register of drawings so we don't need to maintain an internal system for each project,' he says. 'Having one version of the truth, with audit trails showing who did what and when, means we always work to the latest information and can track drawing and document revisions, RFIs and the like.'

'We also have less paperwork now because we can be more selective about what we print. Also, being web-based, these systems are accessible from any PC – I can even work from home if necessary.'

Second tier involvement

However, as a specialist, Clark & Fenn Skanska can be omitted from key decisions about how extranets will be used. 'Some project teams simply use these systems as online filing cabinets to store everything, with little to identify which documents and drawings are relevant to different specialists and suppliers,' says Jan.

'By involving us in early consultations about how the extranet will be configured and used, we can ensure, for

example, that project protocols specify drawings in the right formats,' he continues.

'Likewise, all items relating to, say, suspended ceilings, can be easily identified so that we don't waste time with irrelevant drawings.'

Specialists have long pleaded for earlier involvement in key design and construction decisions and this applies to technology too. Software providers often stress the 'soft' issues relating to collaboration.

BIW Technologies' Paul Wilkinson says: 'Successful collaboration is only 20 per cent technology; the other 80 per cent relates to people and processes. This covers both how the software is implemented and supported – BIW is one of a new breed of Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) businesses – and, more importantly, how project teams come together to agree common standards and processes and to work in a more transparent way.'

'Clearly, the earlier you involve specialist contractors and suppliers such as Clark & Fenn Skanska in making key decisions about design and construction (and the information technologies to support those decisions) the more likely you are to get an integrated approach and so avoid duplication, wasted time and costly re-work.'

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