

Project Management Online

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The steel fabrication process is often delayed as steel contractors wait to receive responses to technical questions (RFIs) and approvals of shop-drawing submittals. Fortunately, online construction management services, which automate the entire documentation process, can dramatically speed up this process. Online systems make the information available to the recipients as soon as it is entered into the system. There are no spreadsheets to revise and nothing to fax or email.

OPERATIONS

The most effective online systems use Web sites to automate routine and repetitive tasks, like RFIs and submittals. All communication is electronic. Using an online RFI form, a steel contractor submits questions that are routed to the general contractor. The general contractor can review and electronically forward the question to the architect. Similarly, the architect can review and forward the question to the structural engineer.

The architect reviews the engineer's electronic response and submits it to the Web, where it is immediately available for the entire project team to view. There is none of the delay inherent in faxes or emails.

The structural engineer's comments and approvals for shop drawings can also be logged online. The steel contractor can view this information electronically, reducing the time spent waiting for approvals.

An online date-stamped log of all RFIs, submittals and the like eliminates confusion about whether and when the information was available. This makes it easier to monitor the cycle of approvals from the structural engineer to the steel contractor, helping identify delays.

Finally, online systems can store documents such as CAD drawings, although these items are normally secondary to the high-traffic areas (e.g., RFIs).

THE CASE FOR ONLINE CM

Online construction management services offer potential gains for steel contractors and structural engineers.

■ **Reduced workload**—Steel contractors can obtain needed information faster, helping them to complete projects on time. An online service also reduces the time needed for structural engineers to answer RFI questions.

■ **Increased profits**—Steel fabrication work can be completed and invoiced sooner, payment received earlier and shop labor freed for other projects. Structural engineers can answer the steel contractor's questions faster, freeing them for work on other projects.

■ **Faster decisions**—The amount of time saved with online services increases proportionately with the number of different parties who have to view and approve information.

■ **Online "paper trail"**—With its immediate access to information and electronic search capabilities, the online service can significantly reduce the time needed to research previous communication and/or submittals.

■ **Confidentiality**—The most effective online systems preserve the private exchanges of information between subcontractors and the general contractor, or between the architect and structural engineer. These systems also assure that the architect has approved the structural engineer's responses before they reach the steel contractor.

INCENTIVES

Even though they have a lot to gain from an online construction management system, few structural engineers or steel contractors are involved in the decision to use such a system. Companies that want to maximize their profits while reducing their workload should consider promoting their use.

To encourage adoption of an online system, steel contractors should consider what motivates the general contractor. Faster fabrication helps accelerate the entire project schedule. Delays at the critical steel-fabrication stage are almost never made up later.

So everyone has a vested interest in accelerating this part of the process. By promoting an online system as an "acceleration tool," steel contractors and engineers might gain a preferred bidding or selection position with their clients.

CRITERIA FOR ONLINE SYSTEMS

When the decision is made to use an online system, the steel contractor and structural engineer should help select that service, to assure that it meets their needs for simplicity, ease of use and focus.

■ **Simplicity**—The online service must both look simple and be simple to use. The structural engineer and steel contractor must be able to input information with ease. If the system looks complicated, the project team will spend too much time learning how to use it, minimizing its benefits.

■ **Ease of use**—The system must employ familiar methods for formatting and presenting information. It must mirror the way the construction team normally communicates and not ask them to learn a new way to exchange information. Users should be able to teach themselves with little or no training.

■ **Focus**—Steel contractors and structural engineers will benefit most from systems that provide efficient ways of communicating RFIs and submittals. That capability should be the most important consideration, far above capabilities such as the storage of CAD drawings, memos and schedules.

Steel contractors and structural engineers have a great deal to gain from online construction management services. By leveraging their critical role in the construction sequence to actively promote such systems, they can increase efficiencies, reduce workloads and maximize profits.

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