

Builders are no longer forced to make due with separate and competing software applications. The result is better communication, data access, and project cost control.

by Jim Waldrop

As most builders who've experienced the situation know, separate software systems running parallel tasks can complicate rather than streamline a project's processes. And while management gurus in the manufacturing sector realized early on that technology was best used as a tool for process improvement, the homebuilding industry has been slower to embrace that approach.

Instead, builders have too often coped with limited-task software, either because they have invested significant dollars or time into the packages and are determined to make them work, or because they simply aren't sure which technology step to take next. It has become an, "if it ain't broke too much, don't fix it," situation. The trouble is, being just a little broke often means costs aren't being optimally controlled—and that has a negative effect on the builder's bottom line.

Many industry experts agree that residential building software should aim at cost containment, a critical tool in helping builders predict their true bottom line costs. But finding a program that goes to work the way the homebuilder's business goes to work can be a daunting task for even the most technologically adventurous.

There's no question that building is a lot like a chess game—each move has an impact on the next one. So software systems that don't support the interactive nature of the homebuilding business really aren't a solution. Fortunately, software developers who really understood the residential construction business have recently begun to create systems which marry the various tasks and jobs that make up a construction project into automated business processes. Finally, builders have a true integrated software solution that could help them better contain costs.

Today's Technology

Here's where the right integrated software system with interactive capabilities can make a dramatic difference to the bottom line. Homebuilding software designed to continuously track and update each phase of the building process can offer a wealth of information on each job, providing everything from revised scheduling of contractors to updated estimates and work orders.

With the simple addition of new information into the system the software automatically updates the entire chain of activities associated with that job. Armed with this up-to-date information, builders can quickly adjust and reallocate resources. Building crews can be sent to other job sites, expediting work and not wasting precious time and labor costs.

Asking the Right Questions

Builders should consider that a goal (in this case, appropriate software selection) without a plan (one that's budget-appropriate, realistic and has an implementation schedule) and a process (which involves selection criteria and evaluation methods) is a recipe for frustration and, ultimately, disappointment. No matter what the goal, taking the right steps to make the goal a reality is vital. An integrated, comprehensive software program, one that truly works as an enterprise resource planning system, can help lay the groundwork for future success.

Before making the software investment, builders should examine their own business practices from the inside out, then ask themselves three key questions: "How does my business really work today?"; "Where do I want/need to have better control?"; and "What critical facts do I want to learn, or be more aware of?" Builders should keep the answers to these questions in mind as they review various software packages. THB

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