

How one company found the path to paperless operations

Forget for a moment that you may be holding a newspaper in your hands when you read this. Our topic for today is going paperless.

I remember a conversation with my Uncle Al decades ago at the dawn of the home computer era in which he rightly predicted that we wouldn't always need paper to distribute news. He was right. The digital environment enables you to read our stories and features online or via your iPad or other portable device. But what about other businesses?

This week Ajax Building Corp. announced that it won a Bronze Vision Award from Constructech magazine for its use of technology in going paperless. The occasion was the construction management for the \$17.6-million William R. Hough Hall project at the University of Florida.

The Vision Award honors firms that have realized the advantages of using modern technologies in their operations. Ajax won in the \$100-\$200 million General Contractor category.

Tom Crow, Ajax's project manager on Hough Hall, traces the origin of paperless construction back about 10 years, when architects were starting to put drawings and documents on electronic media, usually a CD, for easier distribution. Ajax followed suit about six years ago after deciding it needed procedures and software in place not only to handle documents, but to tie in such procedures as invoicing to its accounting program.

Having worked in the business, I can tell you that commercial construction generates mountains of paperwork, from contracts, drawings, specifications and change orders to status reports, requests for information from subcontractors, and all the correspondence between the project owner, designers, engineers and construction team.

Ajax and others are solving that by making documents into Adobe files that can be passed around more easily, revised and stored where everyone can get them. "It speeds it up," Crow says. "We don't have to fool with paper submittals."

If a file is too big to email, such as a set of drawings, it can be left on an FTP site for users to download as needed. Ajax's Penta software keeps up with changes in the documentation and as construction progress is verified, helps with paying subs.

"The advantage is that I can be anywhere and have access to those files, go in, work on them, save them, then at night it's backed up," Crow said. Turnaround times on document revisions are now a couple of hours instead of several days.

Ajax figures that it saved 1,000 pounds of paper during the Hough Hall project, which was completed in the summer of 2010. The paperless process was so successful that Ajax has used it on all projects since then in both Florida and Georgia. Jay Smith, Ajax vice president, hopes to implement it on the Public Safety Complex construction now starting.

Besides saving clients time and money, "It's just phenomenal what it's done to make things faster," Smith says. "And what it does is allow us to do a lot more, quicker as well."