

Tips for Selecting Construction Software

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Construction software is a hot topic these days for design and construction firms. There are hundreds of different construction software packages and solutions available. Each promises to save money, improve efficiency, and improve project delivery. Selecting the right product for your company can be very challenging. To ensure that your firm is making the right decision and getting a return on your software investment, take a prudent approach. Define your business challenges and diligently review the competitive offerings.

Defining your needs

Start by addressing the business challenges you are trying to achieve. Do you need solutions for: estimating, collaboration, document and project management, cost accounting, invitation to bid, preconstruction, etc. Defining the core functionalities and capabilities of a software program is a critical step in the process. The key is to identify the software solution that works best with your company's unique activities and processes.

Consider the Cost

Cost is a key consideration of any software purchase. With construction management software, there are a wide range of products and even more pricing options. Far too many contractors buy more software than they need. Construction software vendors will typically offer licensing agreements based on the number of users, product volume, company size or a combination of variables. Consider these cost factors when making a decision.

Engage the users

No construction software tool will be effective if it is not used. When beginning your review process, develop a core team within your firm that is representative of potential users. Include finance, IT, project management, design, project controls, preconstruction, procurement and others that might be using the system. These team members can help better define your needs, offer diverse perspectives, and will more likely be bought in to the final selection.

Ensure your vendor offers customized training

Purchasing the software is the easy part. Be sure to choose a vendor who includes a full team of training and technical staff that can provide customized instruction and implementation support. Ask the vendors about their training approach and construction industry experience. Specifically ask them what the average training time is before someone can start using the system.

Understand how you will be supported and how custom development is handled

Construction management software should not be a cookie cutter package. Each design and construction company is different and each construction project is unique. Your construction management software should be unique, too. Your construction management software partner needs to be relied upon as a member of your team. This includes availability to quickly develop effective solutions without charging you for

every modification. In addition, make sure the support is U.S.-based and included in your purchase price.

Don't underestimate the human-element

Often times software packages are sold on the premise of automation. With so many variables and moving parts during a construction project it is inevitable that there will need to be human-interaction for certain aspects of an interface. Make sure that provider allows for continued end-user support and service management so that you do not create an additional list of tasks for your personnel.

Select a firm that knows construction

Many firms are new to the construction industry. When selecting your construction management software solution, look to a vendor that is stable, established, and knows the construction industry. Make sure your vendor has people who understand construction, workflows, and how design firms and contractors make money.

Make sure you are in good company

Be sure to review the vendor's customer list. When reviewing vendors, look for firms that are in similar markets, have similar revenues, and share common factors with your firm. When talking with your sales representative, ask them specifically how their product has impacted their existing clients. Ask for concrete examples and case histories. Also be sure to ask for references and call them! If the vendor refuses to provide you with references at their client companies, that is a red flag.

Not all software is created equal

With all of the construction software packages out there, not everything is created equal. Packages that might be great tools for document management and collaboration might be lousy for job cost accounting. When reviewing construction software vendors, find out the specific areas in which the vendor excels. These areas should be in close alignment with your firm's specific needs.

Safe and secure

Many construction software packages are cloud-based and may put your information at a security risk. When reviewing vendors, ask about where your data will be hosted, if there is redundancy, and how they address security.

Beyond the demo

Demonstrations are great opportunities to get a feel for the system, navigation and features. Most construction software systems are based on industry best practices and can be adaptable. Use the demonstration as an opportunity to ask about your specific situation and challenges. Typically, the demonstrations focus on the software's "bells and whistles." Ask your vendor if they are willing to give you a free trial or a money back guarantee. In reality, you cannot determine if the system works for your firm until you've started using it on actual projects.

Don't "overbuy" the software

Too many companies select systems for the "bells and whistles." While these features may be appealing, they do little to impact company performance and the bottom line. Make sure you choose software that you will use to its fullest capacity. Many firms invest in a costly technology solution and only end-up using 10% of the functionality.

Construction software offers tremendous promise and potential, however, there are many pitfalls for design and construction firms. By defining your needs, engaging your users, and thoroughly reviewing vendors, you can find the right solution for specific needs, increase productivity, improve profitability and demonstrate a return on investment.

Zane Sharpe is Vice President for NextPlans.com. He can be reached at 866.215.0428 or zanesharpe@nextplans.com.

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