

CONTRACTOR Construction

Manage information flow

By LEIGH JASPER

IN THE UK, the use of collaboration technology on construction projects has increased from less than 5 per cent of new projects in 2000, to more than 40 per cent in 2005. This growth prompted an independent study into the benefits that have been identified by users of collaboration solutions. The research, commissioned by the Network of Construction Collaboration Technology Providers (NCCTP) and undertaken by Benchmark Research, surveyed 272 users of collaboration technology from 195 companies – including clients, contractors, project managers, quantity surveyors and designers. The study found that 98 per cent of collaboration technology users said they have benefited from using the solution; 74 per cent of clients prefer to work with contractors that have experience of using the solution; and 68 per cent of clients insist on contractors using it.

The UK market is considered to be about three years more mature than the Australian market, making it an indicator for the local market. So, will collaboration technology become a standard on Australian construction projects? The answer can be found by addressing three areas:

- Why is there a need for collaboration technology?
- How does collaboration technology work?
- How can it benefit projects?

Understanding the need

Increasing numbers of organisations believe that traditional processes for managing information – such as paper documents, couriers, email and fax – are not efficient enough to manage the vast volume of information on modern projects. For example, a typical medium-sized project may generate 2,000 drawings that need to be shared between 40 organisations. With four revisions of each drawing, that makes 320,000 drawing transactions.

Add to that 200,000 mails/faxes sent, plus 300,000 received, 90,000 replies, 30,000 forwarded, and the total pieces of correspondence are around 620,000. This results in nearly one million pieces of information, that need to go to the right people, at the right time and in the right form.

How it works

Collaboration technology replaces traditional processes of information exchange by storing all

project information – including drawings, documents, and correspondence – online in a central, secure site. This enables project participants to view, track, share and archive their information from any location, at any time – using nothing more than a standard computer, web-browser and internet connection.

In practice, this means that feasibility studies, drawings, approvals, schedules, specifications, standards, procedures can all be viewed online; team members can add comments, issue notices, instructions and requests for information; and then publish drawings and documents, singly or in batches. Everyone works on the most up-to-date, accurate and relevant information, with earlier revisions securely archived in case they are needed.

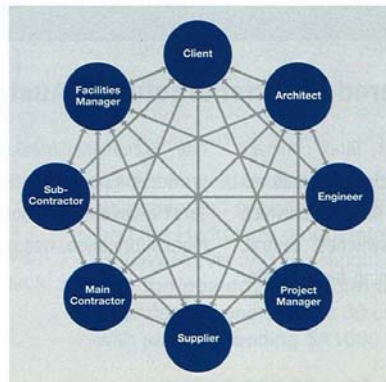
Benefiting projects

The NCCTP study found that in terms of project management, communications and team working: 98 per cent of collaboration technology users felt they benefited from having information held centrally; 91 per cent said they spent less money on document distribution; and 86 per cent reported an overall improvement in communication. In terms of document management, storage and retrieval: 93 per cent of users said there was less chance of losing important documents and 90 per cent said it was easier to find and retrieve their documents.

Inaccurate or late information is the primary cause for disputes and delays on construction projects, highlighting the importance of traceability and accountability. Of those questioned in the study, 95 per cent of users benefited from improved visibility of documents, 94 per cent said there was better accountability; and 86 per cent said there was less confusion over which document version is current. The report concluded that, by using collaboration technology, companies increased productivity, reduced costs and reduced their exposure to risk.

Based upon the adoption rates for collaboration technology in the UK, it is likely that the rapid uptake seen in Australia will continue. Currently around 20 per cent of new projects in Australia use the solution; that figure should be closer to 80 per cent within the next three years.

Leigh Jasper is Managing Director of Aconex, a collaboration technology provider.



A comparison of construction project communication based on traditional processes (L) and using collaboration technology (R).