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Overcoming the information challenge

Managing information has always been a challenge on mining projects.

Even a small project can generate tens of thousands of documents, drawings and specifications.

Technical queries and requests for information can also run into the thousands.

In an increasingly globalised industry, controlling the flow of information within the project team is becoming more difficult as teams are becoming more dispersed.

On large projects it is usually

the norm to have organisations and consultants based across several countries.

To overcome this, a growing number of projects are using an online collaboration tool to manage information and link dispersed parties.

Online collaboration tools are web-based systems, delivered as a service for the life of the project, that allow team members to view, track and share their documents and project mails at any time and from any location.



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Overcoming the information challenge

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Australian company Aconex is the world's largest provider of this collaboration technology and it services \$210 billion worth of projects across 63 countries.

Projects using the system include Beltana South in New South Wales and Rapid Growth Projects 3, 4 and 5 in Western Australia.

Aconex CEO Leigh Jasper believes online collaboration tools are far more suited to the needs of a project and can deliver numerous benefits to users.

"Existing tools for managing files and correspondence – such as paper documents, email and self-hosted software – were not created for the collaborative environment, and certainly weren't designed to cope with the complexities of today's projects," Mr Jasper says.

"The result is that these tools are exposing projects to delays in start-up, increased costs, rework and other risks.

"Using an online collaboration tool saves time due to team members having fast access to and distribution of their data, reduces costs such as printing and postage, and controls risks such as information loss and works being carried out using outdated files."

McConnell Dowell engineering manager Jonathan Scott used Aconex on a recent project.

Over the 15-month project, more than 400 people from 70

organisations used the system to store and distribute 70,000 documents and project mails.

"We needed to control a huge amount of documentation," Mr Scott says.

"About \$55 million was spent purchasing equipment and materials and we had to manage drawings, data sheets, specifications, maintenance manuals, quality documents, certificates and records for each item.

"We had suppliers in France, Germany, the UK, Korea, Singapore and Australia, so managing this online with Aconex sped up the submission and approval process by cutting paper transmittals.

"The result was much less work at our end and, because everything is traceable, it's foolproof."

Collaboration tools maintain a full archive of documents and project mail and keep audit trails of each transaction.

As well as managing risks, McConnell Dowell found this helped minimise the impact when people left the project and made it easier for newcomers to get up to speed.

"In the past we've had issues losing information and knowing which document is the latest version," Mr Scott says. "These things can easily happen but with Aconex we can be sure that when we look at a document, it's the latest version.

"There's a big turnover of staff, so it's a big benefit that everything is easy to find."

Through automating manual processes such as updating document registers and entering data in spreadsheets, using an online collaboration tool helped McConnell Dowell to half the number of document controllers required on the project.

"With the old systems there was a lot of double up in work," Mr Scott says.

"It would take someone to type in all the information, then when it was transmitted it would have to be entered again at the other end.

"With Aconex there is an outright increase in productivity.

"I've been on similar-sized jobs and they had twice as many document controllers.

"Because it's easy to use, the system makes it easy for anyone to find what they need."

Aconex has seen uptake of its system double each year for the past five years and Mr Jasper believes that online collaboration tools could become standard on mining projects.

"Taking a project-centric approach to information management makes sense," he says.

The challenges are entirely different from day-to-day document control because you're dealing with so many external parties that are often far removed from the site. "Online collaboration tools provide a solution to this, so we expect to see more and more companies adopt this technology." ■