

IN DEPTH: CONSTRUCTION

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Plan room may be relic as online service arrives

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Of the benefits offered to members of the Carolinas Associated General Contractors, perhaps the most important might be access to the 11 plan rooms across the Carolinas.

These quasi-libraries essentially serve as a conduit between general contractors and specialists looking for work from public and private owners. The rooms are routinely filled with estimators and contractors who are looking to bid on work. It's not uncommon for estimators from rival firms to bump into each other.

Catching up with the Internet age, however, may cut traffic there. In early September, the Carolinas AGC introduced an Internet-based program that may revolutionize the way that contractors estimate and bid on projects.

"It may eventually make the bid rooms obsolete," says Leslie Blum, vice president of business development for the Carolinas AGC. "It's difficult to see why a general contractor would want to send an estimator to a bid room once they start using the new product. Once they try it, they're going to want it."

Blum bases that statement on a strong initial sign-up for the product, which the AGC calls the Internet plan room.

The product is a joint venture with iSqFt, a Cincinnati-based software firm whose online plan room service is already in use in 14 markets in the United States.

Essentially, the Internet plan room makes blueprints available online via the AGC Web site. Through a partnership with Duncan Parnell, plans are scanned and placed on the Web.

Contractors need not have extensive or particularly up-to-date computer equipment, nor a speedy Internet connection.

"One of the many reasons we chose iSqFt was that their technology did not necessitate the use of a high-speed Internet service or the latest and fastest computer equipment," says Blum.

Contractors can search for up to 21 types of jobs, search specifications by key words, view plans, zoom in and out, make proprietary notes on the plans, use on-line estimating plans, and print or order plans.

The Carolinas AGC stresses benefits such as reduced travel costs to plan rooms, time savings, a more focused bidding and estimating process, easier bidding for subcontractors, plus significantly reduced estimating time. Even with the slowest Internet connection, downloading blueprint pages usually takes less than a minute.

Required computer equipment is fairly basic:

- Pentium 150-MHz processor or better 32 megabytes of RAM or better
- Minimum 120 megabytes of free hard-disk space to download plans
- Video adapter and monitor that support VGA or higher resolution

The Carolinas AGC and iSqFt provide the necessary software in addition to support.

The online plan room is a subscription-based service. AGC member pricing is \$2,800 per year for all North Carolina and South Carolina project listings. Software is included in the subscription price. Nonmembers can pay \$3,800 per year for the project listings. Carolinas AGC membership dues for subcontractors and suppliers begin at \$795 per year.

An introductory offer also includes a free Hewlett-Packard plotter.

One estimator who is currently taking advantage of a free trial is Denny Pugh, a project estimator with Procom, a Greensboro-based subcontractor specializing in roofing and interiors. Pugh is mostly pleased with the service.

"The best things are speed and cost-savings," says Pugh. "I like it so far for the most part. It's particularly useful for smaller projects."

Pugh, however, points to the lack of clarity of some plans as a drawback.

"I think this might be better suited to a firm actively involved in a lot of hard-bid situations," he says. "But the service is still pretty handy for our work."

The AGC promises that improvements and enhancements are planned. These will include an ever-increasing number of projects, e-mail notification and clearer drawings.

"We're scanning like crazy right now," says Blum. "We're working towards getting architects to list plans directly to the service, obviously protecting the plans so that they cannot be changed, thus protecting the intellectual integrity of the work."

Construction Software Technologies Inc. produces the iSqFt software. The company has a national contract with the Association of General Contractors and provides service in 14 states with commitments for another 20.

Construction Software Technologies President and Chief Executive Dave Conway says "we worked very hard to tailor the product for the Carolinas AGC. It's the largest AGC chapter in the country, so it's particularly important that it be successful."

The AGC reports that on the first two days of availability, 30 members called to subscribe. The Carolinas AGC has 3,400 members.

One of those initial subscribers is Rod Johnson, a project coordinator with Charlotte-based Lucas Concrete Products Inc.

"For a small, family-owned business like ours, the product is a significant time- and money-saver," says Johnson. "It cuts out the trips to the plan room and helps us make the most of technology."

In a softening economy, with jobs decreasing and the pressure to find work increasing, the improved search capabilities provided by the online plan room should make it more popular, Blum says.

"Once estimators discover how efficient this can make the bidding and estimating process, they may not want to return to the plan room," she says. "This product significantly broadens the market for many contractors and subcontractors."