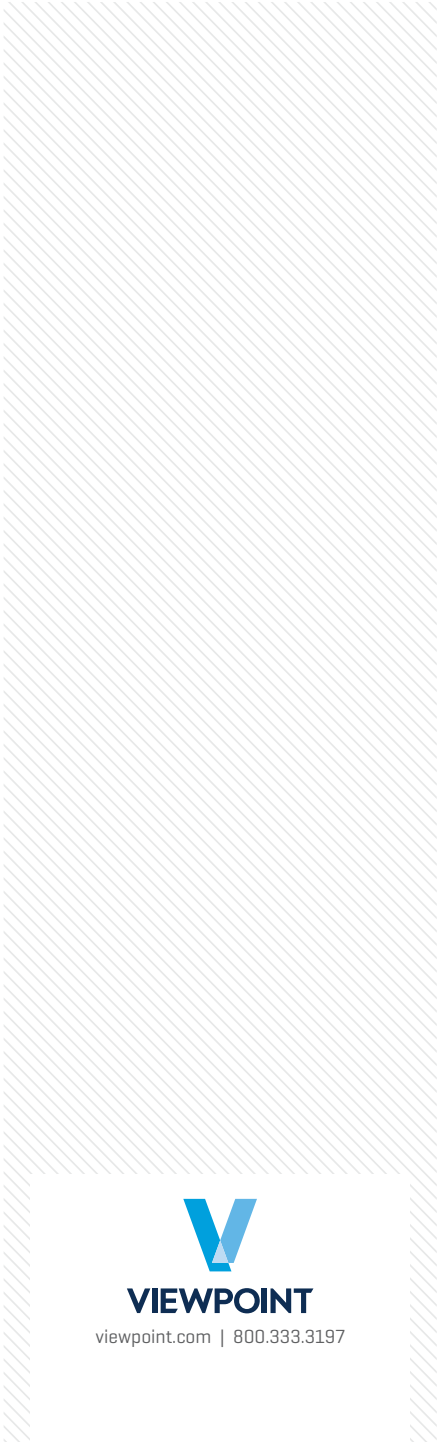


Improving Communication, Collaboration Between the Office and the Field

Finding the sweet spot for mutually beneficial data exchange can save time, empower employees and add to the bottom line



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It has been the topic of conversation and consternation for ages in the construction industry. How can employees in the office and in the field communicate better?

Those in the field depend on the office staff, and those in the office depend on those in the field. Virtually everyone agrees that the accurate exchange of information is vital to a healthy business. But sentiment alone will not create a communications bridge between the two. Construction business owners cannot sit and wait for the two sets of employees to make it happen on their own. It takes intentional decision-making and planning.



Start by thinking about the difference between field and office employees.

Those in the office have a hefty workload, including handling:

- Payroll
- Accounting
- Contracts
- Surety bond documents
- Regulation forms
- Insurance policies
- Compliance documentation

They use tools like computers and printers.

Those in the field are tasked with making sure the actual

work—digging the holes, pouring the concrete, building the walls, installing electrical systems and piping in plumbing and mechanical systems—gets done. But they also need to manage data, including:

- Tracking equipment use
- Tracking labor time
- Updating job progress and job costs
- Resolving conflicts and managing project changes
- Adjusting material and inventory data as needed

They use tools like, well, tools.

You get the idea. But, just because their job objectives are vastly different does not mean that good communication is impossible. There is a bi-directional need to share information. It is up to management to put systems in place to make it happen.

Take a look at the information needed in the field. It does not include many of the bits of information needed in the office. It is best not to overload field employees with unnecessary communication. Too much data can be overwhelming and even annoying to them, which makes adoption—and staying on task—more difficult.

Conversely, what is the most important information for them? Communicating quickly with the office about job change orders and equipment scheduling are vital to success, for example. Think about all the information that would be most beneficial to them and what they actually want to see. Ask them their opinions as you move forward, and really listen to their suggestions. Buy-in is not accidental. It must be earned.

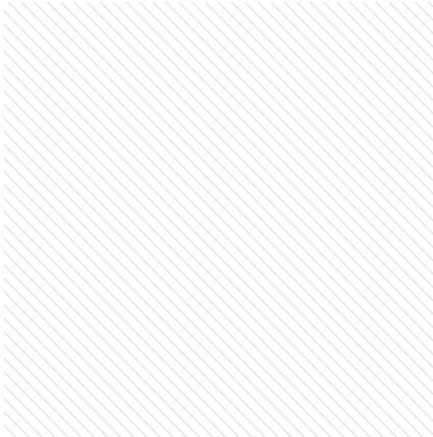
The trick is finding the sweet spot where employees receive the most helpful data but are not burdened with too much. With the right decisions, you will find yourself with an empowered, unencumbered staff that is faster, more efficient and better equipped to deal with both day-to-day issues and the bigger concerns that are inevitable for any construction business.

Must-haves

When it comes to the actual communication tools used to connect the field and office, two components are mandatory today: mobile friendly apps/applications and use of the cloud for easy-to-access data.



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To stay competitive, businesses must increase speed and reduce costly mistakes in their estimates



Though some construction organizations do provide their own devices to workers in the field, many often work in a BYOD—bring your own device—system. Some have iPhones, some androids, or tablets, or even laptops. Communication requires software that is device-agnostic. Every team member should be able to use the app/application that you choose for your business communication.

The software should be accessible from any browser. And this is where the cloud comes in. Regardless of the system, or of its location, the cloud makes the data available to everyone on the team—in the field, and in the office too. If you rely on data entry in a control system only, your company will lose volumes of valuable information. The field teams will operate without the full power of the office suite applications and the office will be forced to wait for information to be entered.

True integration between the office and the field occurs when leading-edge software systems are in place that allow for real-time information exchange. Whether someone wants to verify work history or look at job photos or plans, or needs to enter job progress data or adjust labor on the fly, an integrated system provides the tools to make it happen.

Empowering the field

Those in the field typically have a more difficult time with adoption. They are, after all, doing the heavy lifting of construction work and are not on their mobile device or computer all day. And, they are pressed for time. If management makes usage easy for them, they are more eager to adopt.

Features such as pull-down menus that anticipate the way your software will be used should be taken into consideration. Select intuitive commands. Choose a dashboard that is easy to read and understand. Make sure it is responsive and fast.

If it isn't easy and fast, it's just wasted money. One anonymous project manager summed it up this way, "If my field techs have to click more than twice, they won't use it. They will just call."

Unstructured communication such as phone calls do not provide a record of the communication. Structured communication provides benefits to everyone on the team. Experts estimate that only about 10 percent



of business communications are structured. There is opportunity to exceed that standard. The more structured communication, the sharper your competitive edge.

As companies improve their collaborative structure and collect more data, this opens the door to true business intelligence. And that is the ultimate goal. Business intelligence leads to better performance, more accountability, and better decision-making and planning for future projects.

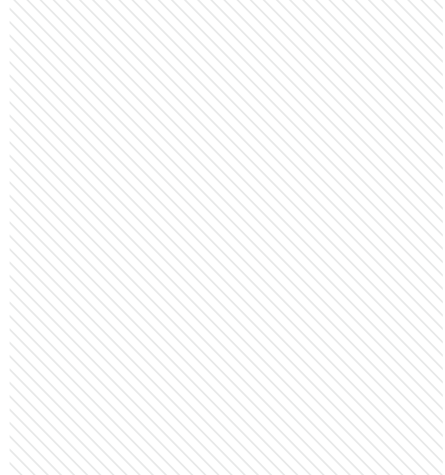
Proper business intelligence is rooted in detailed data analytics. The more data that is gathered, the more intelligence that is gained. With the right information, you can find out where your business is performing poorly and where things are going well. Problem areas that need your attention can be identified sooner. Unplanned overtime is reported earlier. Unexpected delays are monitored in real time. Material costs are automatically available for review.

Without paying attention to the data and understanding the analytics, even the best project planning can go off the rails. True communication between the office and the field, and making the most of that communication, requires an intentional business strategy with data and intelligence goals.

When construction business owners follow the data and put it to work for them, they can be more accurate, more organized, and make more money. And the key to achieving that is getting your office and field teams working in unison—in real time.



With the right software solution, your company will be transformed, well beyond the estimating department.




Best Practices

Office-Field Communication Management



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1 Determine what data is most valuable.
 Before choosing and setting up a system to benefit office and field communication, determine what bits of information are most beneficial. Information overload can be as damaging as no information.
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2 Set up a system that allows data to be easily shared.
 Select easy-to-use, fast, easy-to-navigate software for the highest adoption rates. Use the cloud to store your information so everyone has access to it.
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3 Make a commitment to follow through with providing information.
 Get buy-in from your employees. Be transparent during the process. Answer questions and listen to feedback.
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4 Use gathered business intelligence to make decisions and future bids, staffing and other critical topics.
 Data is useless if it isn't analyzed. Business intelligence provides opportunities for better decisions, more efficient processes, and higher margins.
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5 Have regular face-to-face meetings to review data and the process of collecting data.
 In the beginning, tweaks will need to be made. Work out the small issues that come up with participation from the office and the field to prevent bigger issues down the road.

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