

School's Out!

There's no summer vacation for Hoffman Corporation. The last day of school signals the beginning of a 12-week building marathon.

By Joseph McKendrick

In the construction business, a lot of pieces need to come together before a project can move from drawing board to reality. A construction project manager needs to juggle dozens of simultaneous jobs with hundreds of suppliers and work teams. Delays or missed deadlines can cost thousands of dollars. Materials delivery deadlines must be tightly coordinated with contractor schedules; payments need to be made on time to avoid interrupting the workflow.

No Time to Play



Timing needs to be especially tightly tuned for companies involved in school construction, since the bulk of construction activity has to be compressed into three summer months. Hoffman Corporation (www.hoffman.net), a design and construction firm based in Appleton, Wis., is no stranger to such tight deadlines: school construction represents more than half of its business. Plans for every phase of each project — from design to excavation to painting the halls — need to be in place for that magic day in June. Tax dollars are tight, and the construction team has to make the most of the 12-week window.

“The last day of school is a true constraint,” says Cheri Kessler, Primavera systems administrator for Hoffman Corporation. “On that day, everyone had better be ready to go. There’s a very limited amount of time, and a lot of activities that have to happen during summer vacation

while no one is there.” Of course, a school building takes longer than three months to build, and remaining construction needs to be as unobtrusive as possible once classes commence in the fall. “That’s why planning is key for us,” says Kessler.

To better manage the contract management process for building schools and similar types of facilities, Hoffman is in the process of rolling out Primavera Expedition project control software to its project managers. With about 50 projects going at any one time, Hoffman has found Expedition to be a valuable tool for managing multiple construction projects. Project managers can log on and access project data, purchase orders, invoices, and payment schedules. And soon, under a pilot program, project managers will even be able to search data on appropriate subcontractors through the Expedition interface. Also on the drawing board

are plans for collaborative and wireless connectivity that will extend these capabilities to all remote sites as well.

Participation is key

Hoffman Corporation, a family-owned business with more than 100 employees, has been in business since 1892. While its primary base is in the upper Midwest, the company has grown into a national presence, and now manages projects from coast to coast. The company’s philosophy is to engage in projects that provide “living, learning, working, worshipping and enjoying”—including schools, medical facilities, offices, and churches. The company has designed and built such projects as the Genoa-Kingston High School in Illinois and Waupaca High School in Wisconsin; Cub Foods Corporate Headquarters in St. Paul, Minn.; and BioLife plasmapheresis centers in Wisconsin, North

Carolina, Arkansas, and Montana. Typical projects range from \$2 million to \$25 million.

The company zealously practices participative management, and its architects, interior designers, land and space planners, and construction managers all work closely and collaboratively with facility owners. All ideas are put on the table and considered, from building shapes to floor coverings. “We’ve got a lot of people who are very creative, and who all do their own thing,” says Kessler. “Everyone’s opinion matters here. We all have good ideas, and we try to blend all of those ideas together.”

ing documents. “You would not believe how many spreadsheets can be developed across a project,” Kessler says. “Since we manage by consensus, there was never a ‘decree’ on standardizing our approach.” For Hoffman, the challenge was to find a way to support project managers with a more centralized and powerful information management tool, but without reducing their autonomy or requiring changes in the way they do business.

The easy way

For Kessler, Primavera Expedition filled the bill. Shortly after arriving at Hoffman two years ago, she intro-

hours for the old method.” Hoffman’s top management was sold, and insisted the company standardize on the software.

From that point on, all new projects were put on Expedition, and Kessler plans to have all staff members, project managers, and vendors using the system over the coming year. Once complete, she expects to reduce administrative time by at least 50 percent across most projects. “Previously, each time a project manager created a spreadsheet, he or she would have to copy all the subcontractor and billing information,” she relates. Often, data on subcontractors would have to be

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Such an open process may seem an anathema to the discipline of project management, which emphasizes a single point of control and strict adherence to change-control procedures. However, Hoffman’s unique management approach strikes a careful balance between the need for creativity and the need for tightly structured approaches. To accomplish this, the company provides considerable leeway and autonomy to its project managers.

Until recently, managers even selected and used their own software tools, often keeping track of projects with spreadsheets and word process-

duced Expedition as a pilot for a single project. However, it quickly became apparent that the software was needed across the company. “We were doing one project the easy way — with Expedition — and the rest of our projects were still being done the hard way.”

To demonstrate the immediate payback from the new application, Kessler and her colleagues ran the same payment requisition job twice. “We did a requisition with both Expedition and under our old system, and timed them,” she recounts. “The Expedition process was completed in about 45 minutes, compared to four

researched separately. Such data is now maintained in a central repository through Expedition. “Project managers don’t have to start from scratch each time they want a new set of information.” In addition, Kessler’s team is integrating Expedition with Primavera SureTrak Project Manager, which has become Hoffman’s scheduling standard.

Financial integration

Many of the new efficiencies Hoffman acquired are the result of an integration between Expedition and Timberline, the company’s financial application. Hoffman uses Primavera

Expedition TGIF version 2.0 to provide integration between Expedition and Timberline Gold accounting software. The integration of Expedition with the company's accounting function was "the largest informational process change that we ever had here," says Kessler. "It all went very positively, with just a few bumps."

Now, contract changes and details from Expedition can be integrated with accounting information from Timberline. Previously, Hoffman employees had to enter contracts, purchase orders, change orders and invoices into the two systems. The ultimate goal of this integration is single entry of project and financial information, Kessler states. "Once you put it in Expedition, it rolls forward to Timberline, and you're done."

Two more applications are also on tap for integration — a proprietary bidder database and a customer contact database. The bidder database, built in Microsoft Access, is a compilation of all 5,700 subcontractors that have ever worked with Hoffman. Within the next six months, project managers will be able to incorporate vendor background information into a project plan with a single mouse click. "For instance, you may have 62 bidders for painting," Kessler illustrates. "You can pick the one that was awarded the contract, and roll him forward into both Expedition and Timberline, along with the bid amount, contract information, and even if it included tax."

Field reports

Hoffman's field representatives have been clamoring for access to the new system, Kessler says. "They want

to use Expedition to automate meeting reports, punch lists and requests for information," she says. Kessler is investigating potentially rolling out data from Expedition through personal digital assistants (PDAs) as a means of reaching remote users. "We have a lot of people who work at a remote job site, and we don't see them very often," she says. "But, some of the communities we serve don't support T1 or DSL lines." Making data available for download from Expedition to PDAs may help in

As part of the pilot, scheduled for this summer, vendors will receive login passwords and authorization, and will be able to access payment information and project documents from Hoffman's PrimeContract Website, says Kessler. "It's a faster way to share drawings and meeting reports," she says. "It also cuts down paper, cuts down faxing, and even cuts down e-mailing. If you need to meet with someone and review a drawing, you can upload the drawing to the Website."



preparing daily reports and punch lists, tracking material deliveries and quickly turning around RFIs.

More collaboration ahead

Currently, project managers working remotely receive reports via e-mail, and open the documents with an Expedition report viewer locally on their PCs or laptops. Hoffman plans to deploy Expedition data for real-time project collaboration across an intranet. The company will pilot Primavera PrimeContract, a hosted, Web-based system that enables secure project collaboration and progress payment negotiations.

Hoffman offers its services as a complete package, providing its customers with beginning-to-end project management. Using Expedition, the company can keep projects on track and within budget, while leveraging its innovative and participative approach to building design.

And when school's out, the Hoffman team will be ready for the big race to Labor Day. •

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