

They don't know what they know....

My wife was cleaning out some old papers last weekend. "I don't really want to throw all this stuff out - we may need it someday!"

"As a matter of fact, I just found something we could have used a couple of months ago when we were looking for information on..."

I don't remember what we were looking for two months ago, and clearly at the time we needed it she didn't remember she had the information. Of course, if you don't know you have the information it's the same as not having it at all (if a tree falls in the woods...)!

Some firms use a similar method for assembling their library of 'standard details'. That is, grab every detail on every project and dump it in a central location for re-use. This central location can be thought of as a 'trash can' - or perhaps more appropriately a 30 yard construction container.

My usual response to firms considering that kind of information repository is "At what point is it easier to reconstruct the detail from scratch than it is to rummage through years of accumulated trash to find that one gem you're looking for?" Such an arrangement may have a small percentage of good information in it, but since it's buried under a pile of uhhh... 'refuse', it's seldom worth the search.

Where do team members get their 'reference details' from to avoid re-drafting? Ask around and I'm sure you'll find details are swiped from each team member's personal experience - their recent past jobs. The quality of the detail will be dependent upon the success of that same detail in the recent past. It's called 'tacit knowledge'. Not a bad arrangement, all in all. It does have it's limitations, though.

For example, the catalogue of past details is in the head of each team member. If a better detail was used on a recent project but no-one on the current project team has worked on that project - well, it won't get used. Also, as people leave the firm, they take their 'tacit knowledge' with them: even though the details themselves are still in the firm's computers, current team members won't know to look for them.

One method of sharing these mental catalogues is cross-team communication. If projects are presented to the firm on a regular basis, it not only builds staff knowledge and personal presentation skills but also promotes the sharing of the 'internal mental catalogue' of details.

Another catalogue sharing method is to encourage technical reviews for each project. A technical reviewer or team has seen most of the recent details that have gone out the doors, and has the expertise to evaluate them. If that reviewer can advise the project team early enough and frequently enough to advise the team to 'look at this detail on project X' when the needs arise, the best details will get the most use.

Of course, one can actually assign a person or people to take the best details from all your projects, technically evaluate them, clean them up to conform to drafting standards, catalogue them for internal team members, and regularly re-evaluate the library. Experience has shown that this technique is very expensive and time consuming. Old details that are no longer appropriate (due to new building codes, or new building technology) are too seldom pruned from the library, and new details take too long to go through the rigorous review and approval process usually imposed on them. If you currently use this method, try to assess just how many people are using the library vs. how many are using 'the last job they worked on' as their personal library.

Another more technical solution is to use a real search program. If you have not already used it, go to www.google.com Google searches billions of web pages (3,083,324,652 pages at last count) and indexes them by keyword. Google has provided their search and indexing technology in an appliance that plugs into your network.

Docu-Point (www.docu-point.com) sells a 'Drawing Searcher' application which will scan all the drawings on your network and make them searchable (and viewable) through your web browser. They also have an add-on option for including common business application document formats like DOC, XLS and PDF. The last I checked, this product did not have the capability of maintaining search capabilities for off-line files.

A potential danger of any 'library of construction details' is that there is seldom any post-construction follow up. Many years ago, I grabbed a 'standard' counter swinging door detail from the firm's library of fully reviewed and approved details. While drafting a copy of this detail, I noticed that the cut in the countertop was slanted in the wrong direction for the countertop to actually swing open. Apparently, this 'standard detail' was used in several projects and no doubt either corrected in shop drawings or in the field - but the correction never made it's way back to the 'standard' record. I'm assuming the detail was corrected because I never heard that the emergency carpenter SWAT brigade was ever called out with the jaws of life to extricate a poor employee from behind the counter.