

New Year Resolutions

The new year is a natural time to reflect on the past year and make some resolutions for the coming 12 months.

The first things I like to look at are the time wasters:

Early on in CAD when everything was expensive and we were all trying to figure out ways to get reimbursed for the huge technology investment, most of us billed our clients for plotting. When I arrived at one firm as director of IT, plots were recorded by hand (I should say, plots were **supposed** to be recorded by hand). So I incorporated plot billing procedures into our automated plotting routines. As we updated and ultimately switched CAD software, these plot recording routines often needed updating. When we switched to AutoCAD (requiring a rewrite of all of our automation procedures) I finally asked "Is this data worth collecting? How much are we actually collecting for plotting?" It turns out almost nothing was being billed for plotting, due to changes in our contracts (and client expectations) over the years. I saved (or rather, I stopped wasting) a fair amount of hours by not re-writing those routines - and plotting was one click easier for the staff.

Eliminate unused applications or procedures that have outlived their usefulness. Some programs and procedures never catch on in the office, or are rendered irrelevant by more modern technologies. If they are still on your system, they are taking up disk space and valuable support time.

Choose the dumbest procedure in your office and stop doing it. Some office procedures are simply dumb and get in people's way. It's usually something people have to deal with frequently, and it often wastes considerable staff time. It may be plotting procedures, or print ordering, or manual fax logs. Ask yourself if the procedure is needed at all, and (if it is needed) whether it can be simplified or automated. I have found it valuable to send out an email to the office, asking "What is the ONE most valuable tool in our office, and what is the ONE dumbest, time waster?" The responses often confirm your suspicions but they sometimes surprise you - and they always lead to opportunities for change or for staff education.

The next things I look at are opportunities:

In the process of putting together a project, we collect a great deal of information in many different forms. In my office, it was design programming, workflow and space information, but it could easily have included material and maintenance data. I realized we could re-process this information in a manner that would be valuable to the client - for room and resource scheduling for example. With equipment maintenance schedules and locations, we could also provide automated facilities maintenance procedures to the client. The more involved we stayed with the post-construction client, the more aware we became of other opportunities for additional services.

What vital business-related services can I offer to my customers? What is the most requested service to which I respond "we don't do that." Is it something I should be doing? Would it align with my business goals? Should I do it in-house or through a partnership? Would it create a new business opportunity for past clientele?

Is Drafting a core business process to be retained? I have always felt that it is important for project team members to be writing and drafting the construction documents, so that they can make good decisions spontaneously while drafting. This belief came from painful observation of the drafting-review-redlining-redrafting cycle that seemed to be predominant decades ago when drafters inexperienced in AEC did the drafting. A knowledge of both the AEC trade and the computer seemed vital for efficiency. That's why we moved away from secretaries and had the project team type their own project correspondence - and that's why we got the designers to learn CAD.

Now that experienced english-speaking Architects and Engineers are selling drafting services at bargain rates from around the world, when does it make sense to offload drafting? Overseas communications are now immediate and cheap through the use of scanners, faxes, email and instant messaging. Indeed, AEC firms with international offices often touted the value of distributing project work among many time zones for meeting compressed job schedules - why can't firms of any size offer the same efficiencies through partnering with experienced drafting agencies? I'd love to hear from firms with experience (both good and bad) using offshore drafting agencies.

And then of course there are staff issues to consider:

One of the biggest challenges in larger firms is keeping the staff involved and vested in the success of the firm. These are general business issues as well as technology staffing issues. Some firms are good at suggesting special internal projects, but bad on implementing the results - making the staff feel it was all a waste of time.

How can I keep my most valued staff? Are they happy, or do they need education opportunities, or more responsibility? Perhaps a special project with a real chance for success.

How can I encourage my best people to come back after they've left the firm (often called the boomerang effect)?

How can I make my non-performers more invested in success?

Resolutions are important to keep in mind throughout the year, and bring focus to the goals of the coming months. Let me know your resolutions via email.