

PIM is the new buzzword in the A/E world

Want to find out what it is and what it does? Read on!

We're not talking about you, but we all know how haphazard the system of storing ongoing project files or archiving them after the job is done can be.

It's not uncommon to find project drawings stored in one server along with construction documents, while all project communications are stored in each participants' inboxes. This should be simpler.

"As the industry further advances toward a truly integrated approach to project delivery, the amount of information being exchanged and conveyed has grown exponentially," says Brad Schuck, construction administrator with **Tsoi/Kobus & Associates** (Cambridge, MA), an 85-person architecture, planning and interior design firm. "Inherently complex issues, such as structural and building enclosure systems, can require months of continuous coordination. Accurately cataloging what, when and how significant milestones are reached within a project can be overwhelming at times."

Enter project information management (PIM), a term coined by Newforma (which TK&A uses), a software firm that caters to the A/E industry and provides a package that turns chaos into neatness.

"People want to work the way they work now. They just have to manage the information however it comes into the project," says Newforma President Ian Howell. "We've taken complexity away."

Another PIM provider, Attolist, offers the same basic capability by introducing an entirely new way of managing project information, removing traditional e-mail from the equation and allowing users to manage projects in the virtual space—the "cloud"—through *attolist.com*.

"We think that e-mail is just an old way of delivering a project," says Attolist President Scott Baldermann.

Several other providers catering to the A/E industry provide similar PIM services that enhance communication and help archive project data in a structured, easy to access, collaborative platform. Among those are *Buzzsaw* from Autodesk and *ProjectWise* from Bentley, for example. Other packages, such as Microsoft's *SharePoint* collaboration platform, are not specific to the A/E industry, but have proven popular for this market.

What they do

In simple terms, the Newforma *Project Center* manages projects through the e-mail system (often Microsoft *Outlook*) that most architects and engineers already use to manage their projects by cataloging all project files and giving order to chaos.

The comprehensive *Project Center* allows for true collaboration without paper or the need for FTP servers, and allows for document exchanges, design reviews (including BIM models), direct markups, LEED review, and other project milestones, with relevant parties being notified and updated on progress. Users can simply drag project e-mail communications into the specific project folder, where they become accessible to all.

All data is stored in the firm's servers, where it is archived and is easily accessed, also creating an audit trail.

"What we're doing is indexing your own company network," Howell says. "We literally just index everything that is there."

Spencer Warncke, a principal and chief information officer at **Steffian Bradley Architects (SBA)** in Boston, a 150-person architecture, interiors, planning, lighting, and urban design firm, says the previous approach of using an exchange server to store project folders proved to be an "awkward solution, since it embedded e-mail messages in a container that was separate from the rest of the project record."

Project Center "gives you the opportunity to archive pertinent project e-mails on the fly from the *Outlook* client interface

at the push of a button," he says. "It is easy and it is painless. All the message files are stored in the project directory, and because they are indexed along with all the other project data by the Newforma indexing server, they are easily searched by attributes and for content."

One of Newforma's biggest pluses seems to be the ability to address the problem of information sharing across multiple file formats, multiple applications, and even multiple levels of technology sophistication.



To learn more about each of these tools, log on to newforma.com and attolist.com.

Attolist launched a web-based solution two years ago, banking on the idea that integrated project delivery (IPD) is the future of A/E. In Baldermann's words, Attolist enhances communication using cloud computing.

Using a web platform, Attolist allows users to create a project site, which is broken into three sections: basic communication (project management), document management and construction administration.

Like Newforma, the Attolist platform allows for project document exchanges and live markups; unlike Newforma, Attolist allows an unlimited number of users to make markups on a document simultaneously.

Licensing is project-based, meaning that clients don't have to sign for a subscription.

Each system's main advantages are organization, ease of access and promotion of collaboration—ultimately saving clients time and money. Under either platform, a contractor doesn't have to send multiple copies of the same submittal to the architect, engineer, and others; instead, it is able to upload a single copy, gather comments, and post them in the file.

"It's a much simpler way to work," Howell says. ■