

The tools of technology: A contractor's must-have list



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If it feels like the minute you buy a new computer or some other techno-gadget it's outdated, you're right. Technology changes faster than you can click the Send button on an email complaining about your boss – mistakenly addressed to your boss. Unless you set out to be the gadget geek who spends his time acquiring all the new tools, it's impossible to keep up. Thankfully, in business, the best tactic isn't always to keep up, but rather to sit back and let the true die-hards weed out the good from the bad. You can then be selective, choosing to invest only in the technology that has been proven beneficial enough to last.

However, even this approach can be time-consuming and frustrating. Just when you think you've thoroughly researched a technology, it's obsolete or made unnecessary by a newer technology. Well, fear not! There are some technologies that, while continuing to transform, are readily available and offer great potential to contractors now. Here, the five areas where contractors should consider investing, are explained simply.

Scanners

The "paperless world" has not quite arrived, but many companies are buying fewer filing cabinets by storing documents digitally instead. Those dealing with paperwork in the construction business know the pains of shuffling the hundreds of documents required for a job, and the large size of physical drawings and plans make them especially cumbersome.

The advent of faster, more powerful, large-scale scanners and more accurate

After all the hype and hullabaloo, these are the technologies that will bring our businesses into the future

optical character recognition (OCR) software has allowed many companies to reduce, if not eliminate, hard copies of many documents. While the price of large-scale scanners may seem off-putting at first glance, companies using a digital workflow find reduced costs and greater efficiencies in other areas, making a strong case for their return on investment. Documents that are available digitally can be sent via email, reducing shipping costs and allowing quicker access. Digital drawings can rely upon automated scaling and measuring, reducing human error in these areas. Lastly, through precise document management, digital documents offer a tracking mechanism for the history of a document and its revisions.

Digital cameras

A camera is a camera, right? Well, in many cases, that's correct. In the case of a contractor who has to take daily or weekly pictures of the progression of a project, however, a camera that doesn't require the expense of developing film and storing paper photos offers much more. As the technology behind digital photography becomes more stable, the cost of cameras has dropped and the quality of the picture has improved. These facts, combined with the comparative simplicity of downloading a photo from a digital camera to a CD or large computer hard drive, make the digital camera a no-brainer for contractors. Combined with document management software or more specialized photo management software, this new technology should

save you both time and money.

Handheld computers

Known as handheld computers, personal digital assistants, or just simply PDAs, these tiny computers have seen astounding developments in the last five years. Originally just glorified address books, handheld computers now do much of what a laptop can do for traveling workers, albeit on a much smaller screen. With specialized operating systems and software, users can accomplish most of the tasks they'd need to while on the road, including typing a document, recording timecard information in a spreadsheet or tracking tasks in a to-do list.

When purchasing new handhelds, you may want to consider devices with built-in wireless capability, another developing technology that will be essential for contractors of the future. Combining these two technologies allows almost seamless data integration between the home-office and the job site.

Wireless networking

Truth be told, this technology isn't quite there yet, but considering wireless networking is the ultimate dream for most technophiles, it will be soon. Debates over standards for wireless networking continue, but that said, it is possible to create and manage a wireless network in your office or for your off-site employees.

While the most obvious benefit to wireless networking is fewer wires tangled under your desk, the ability for off-site employees to access the internet, and by extension, your network, without

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having to plug their laptop computers or PDAs into phone lines is without rival. For contractors working on site, it's extraordinarily difficult and expensive to install the necessary wiring just so your employees can log onto the internet. While the setup and planning for wireless access for all your employees can be expensive and time-consuming, the possibilities once it's up and running are unbounded. Project managers can have real-time access to your purchasing and accounting systems. Field reports and daily logs can be uploaded on a regular basis. Instant communication between employees at different locations is possible, especially using the next up-and-coming technology, instant messaging.

Instant messaging

It may have started out as a fad – college coeds

sending late-night gossip rife with "emoticons" and shorthand abbreviations like ROFL and XXX – but instant messaging (IM) has blossomed into a viable tool for business communication.

If you're not familiar with instant messaging, it uses small applications running over the internet and allows, as the name implies, typed messages to be sent to recipients instantly. Popular applications include AIM from AOL, Yahoo's Instant Messenger and Microsoft's MSN Messenger, but there are many other options to choose from. Versions designed specifically for business users now offer secure connections, multimedia and file sharing options, and the ability to send text messages to cell phones.

In today's global business world, and particularly

for contractors, whose employees aren't usually just down the hall from each other, options for inexpensive, quick communication are essential. When the project manager at the job site has a question for someone at the home office, being able to send a question, immediately get an answer, and reply with follow-up questions can be invaluable. And, unlike cell phones, IM does not require a per-minute or per-connection charge. Of course, users must be connected to the internet in order to IM, but with IM installed on your wirelessly connected personal digital assistant, that's not an obstacle. **BXM**

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