INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
CONSTRUCTION BEST PRACTICE

Case Study IT032

Installing a new network, operating system, and CAD software in an architects' office

The achievement

LoweRae Architects is a practice of eleven employees and a turnover of around £350,000. They recently replaced their IT systems with a new eleven station Windows NT network incorporating network e-mail, domain name, Internet access and web site. At the same time they replaced drawing software with ArchiCAD.

Key benefits

* The Windows NT network is proving to be reliable and easy to use.
* ArchiCAD is showing improved output and producing high quality presentation material.
* Individual e-mail addresses have resulted in immediate benefits particularly in transferring drawing data and reports.
* As a consequence of the three above, and despite the steep learning curve, staff enthusiasm is high.
* They are now seeking new markets and clients.

The background

LoweRae's previous computer installation was built up over the years on a somewhat ad-hoc basis. The network was peer to peer and, at seven machines, was stretched beyond its limit and had frequent crashes. The memory capacity of the older machines was becoming restricting. The operating system was Windows 3.11 and essential software was not being supported and the backup disk drive was temperamental. They were becoming equally frustrated with the CAD programme.

The approach

The first step was to review the CAD market and then shortlist AutoCAD Architectural Desktop and ArchiCAD together with their current Arkey programme. For compatibility and convenience they looked to the dealers to supply a total integrated package.

An outline schedule of their requirements included the number and particular functions of workstations and their software requirement such as CAD, word processing, e-mail, fax, and Internet. They sought proposals from five companies.

The first stage quotations were comprehensive but varied between companies in terms of memory capacity, speed, size of screens etc. After further discussions they decided to run with ArchiCAD and shortlisted two companies for second stage comparable quotations.

The final decision was made partly on cost but mainly on a belief that the chosen company could provide the installation and the ongoing backup service.

A major concern in contemplating a new CAD programme and operating system was maintaining the continuity of their ongoing Arkey drawings. The version they were using was DOS based and would not run on Windows 95 or later. They therefore had to retain and maintain some of the old workstations. However, as a cost saving, they omitted new screens to the administration workstations and re-used existing 17 inch screens. The new CAD workstations came complete with larger 19 inch screens leaving them short of screens for two of the five retained CAD workstations. This resulted in 'hot screening' for two workstations which has presented problems.

They also retained an A1 inkjet printer that has to be switched between the old Arkey network and the new ArchCAD network. Although this is not difficult, the line settings for each programme have to be switched within the internal controls.

While the change was driven by the Partners, the staff were involved throughout and remained enthusiastic.

An overriding concern was to ensure that they did not lose any data. An advantage of the change is that it has forced them to dump unnecessary data and encouraged them to archive recent data.

Key lessons

★ Change needs to be driven by the partners or have the full support of the partners.

★ Staff should be consulted and involved throughout the process in order to keep them enthusiastic.

★ Having implemented the change, the investment in equipment should be supported by the firm's efforts to seek new markets and clients.

Further information

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