

Built industry takes to cloud computing

by Melody Finnemore

Published: September 10th, 2010

Collaboration often is challenging on just one project site. Yet, when hired to provide commissioning services as part of the Los Angeles Community College District's \$6.1 billion sustainable building program, Inici Group Inc. was charged with developing a cohesive communication network for a project team working on nine campuses spread over 36 cities within the greater Los Angeles area.

Inici Group, a Portland project management firm, met its challenge by relying on cloud computing. It developed a collaborative website where it could post project information that team members could access remotely. It served as a de facto ftp site, allowing project team members to view PDFs and other electronic files that were too large to send via e-mail, said **Tary Carlson**, Inici Group's senior project manager.

"It's been a clearinghouse with one place to go to find information, which has been really helpful, considering that the coordination of all these folks on nine campuses is a challenge," he said.

Cloud computing is a term used increasingly within many industries, including construction, architecture and engineering. It allows companies to store information and software on an Internet-based system, or the "cloud," so they can share those resources and access them from just about anywhere. Cloud computing is a way of storing or processing data on remote servers usually accessible from any location.

Matt Nees, president of the Software Association of Oregon, said the primary benefit is that the user doesn't need to be tied to a particular computer to use those resources. For those in the construction, architecture and engineering fields, that amenity can be particularly useful.

"Whether they are out on the road or in the middle of nowhere, they have full access to it without needing a desktop or laptop for their software," he said.

Nees noted that the benefits are universal to every industry, which is why a growing number of companies are investing in the new technology. While there is some initial expense, the technology reduces information technology costs and increases efficiency in the long run, he said.

"You throw it on the cloud (and) people can access and download the interface application and - boom - there they go," he said.

Bob Palioca, president of **Ideate Inc.**, which provides [Autodesk](#) software and training for architecture, engineering and construction firms, said several companies have found cloud computing useful in managing the licenses they hold for each project.

Others are using the cloud to outsource what normally would be done by IT staff.

"We're finding that many contractors, architecture and engineering firms are finding that's a way to lower their overall IT costs," Palioca said.

In today's economy, reduced expenses and improved efficiency are especially attractive to companies, said **Richard Hill**, technology guru for the PPI Group.

Nees said the biggest challenge at this point is educating people so they feel more comfortable with cloud computing.

"Really it's just a matter of helping people understand that cloud computing is not just some nebulous thing where you throw information out there and there it goes," he said. "Cloud computing is secure. Specialty companies develop these clouds - both public and private - and manage the server farms. They do it efficiently and cost effectively."

Inici's Carlson, who heads AGC of America's Electronic Information Systems Committee, said that cloud computing technology allows companies to move their e-mail, spam filter services and anti-virus software into a shared space. However, many contractors - many that still prefer hard copies of documents - are reluctant to trust the technology's reliability just yet.

"There isn't a wide adoption yet and it really comes down to security," Carlson said. "What happens if the system fails and we lose our data, or if somebody goes out of business and we can't access our data? Presumably there is a backup, but, especially with e-mail, how long is it going to take to get the system back up and running? Those are real considerations, and until they are resolved, some people won't use the technology."

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