

High Tech on the Job Site

by Denise David Baer

I have just returned from our local office superstore, where I bought yet another fax machine. I made the purchase without thinking twice about it. Times have certainly changed.

When Gary and I started our company, our “office” fit into one corner of the living room. We outfitted it with one phone line, a cheap calculator, and a new electric typewriter. A wobbly folding card table and a small wooden kitchen table served as desks. Chairs were dining room castoffs and our filing cabinet a plastic milk crate.

Eleven years later, we’ve filled two large rooms with four metal office desks, comfortable chairs, good calculators at each desk, three computers, a scanner, copier, fax, a half-dozen file cabinets, storage cabinets, bookcases, display cabinets, and a full complement of office supplies. Three phone lines handle the phone and fax traffic.

All of this office equipment has become indispensable as the business has grown, but I can still remember the lengthy discussions Gary and I had each time I recommended we purchase another piece of office equipment. As a start-up, construction equipment purchases always came first; within the first year of business, however, I convinced Gary we really did need two office desks and chairs. And a photocopier: The nearest copying service was several miles away.

Fax Machines and Cell Phones

By the middle of the second year, I had persuaded a reluctant Gary to buy a fax machine. Architects, suppliers, and subs called the office daily requesting our fax number. I saw the handwriting on the wall, and it said we needed a fax

machine — fast. Less than six months after the arrival of the fax machine, Gary was telling subcontractors that they were missing the boat by not owning a fax machine. Convinced that our purchases thus far had served our bottom line, we wondered whether getting other high-tech office equipment onto job sites and into the hands of our project supervisors would help the business even more.

Temporary phone lines and cordless phones — our basic job-site technology — had helped our project supervisors work more efficiently. Projects too short-

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lived to warrant an installed phone line led us to the next step: cell phones. We thought long and hard before outfitting each of our supervisors with a cell phone and Gary with a car phone. We knew this would be an expensive venture. Unsure of its value, we reasoned that at least we could discontinue the service and return the cell phones if they drained profits.

Had I known then what our monthly cell phone charges would be (our bills average \$350 per month for five cell phones), this adventure would never have gotten to the serious discussion stage. However, had I squelched the idea, I would never have realized what a vast improvement those cell phones would make in our project management. I still groan every time I review the cell phone

bills, but I know full well it would be impossible to run many of our projects without them. And the tradeoff of monthly charges for increased efficiency (and profitability) is in our best interest.

Our supervisors use their phones daily to place orders with suppliers, check on deliveries, schedule subs, clarify specifications from architects, discuss manpower and equipment needs with each other, and keep the clients and office updated on their progress. Gary handled these responsibilities in the days before job-site phones, in addition to his sales and estimating tasks; now these responsibilities have been shifted to the job site, where they belonged all along.

Job-Site Fax Machines

A couple of years ago I asked, "Why not put fax machines on job sites?" It seemed like a natural progression, especially since some of our largest projects were located some distance from the office. A job-site fax machine could lessen or eliminate the hours spent traveling between the job site and our office, the architect's office, or any other location simply to pick up or deliver "paperwork."

Our first and only fax machine continued to crank out decent-quality thermal faxes, never giving me a good reason to replace it. Because thermal fax documents fade over time, however, I had been copying every important document, wasting time and paper. Throwing caution to the wind, we shipped the old fax machine off to a job site and purchased a new plain-paper unit for the office.

I knew within the first two weeks of setting up our old machine on the job site that we had made another good decision. Don, our project supervisor, had set up a job-site "office," complete with phone, fax, makeshift desk, drawings, specifications and contract documents, portable file box, and a full complement of forms and paper supplies. He had faxes flying back and forth daily between job site and architects, subs, and suppliers. He also faxed his handwritten weekly meeting notes to me at the office within minutes of the clients' approval; I typed them up and

faxed copies back to him, the architects, and subs the same day. And when the job site became too busy for him to answer the phone, we (or anyone else) could send him a note by fax.

Don found another way of making technology improve his project management. He installed "call forwarding" on the phone line so that when he wasn't on the job site, incoming calls would be forwarded to his cell phone.

Don's success with the job-site fax machine prompted us to try it with the other supervisors as larger projects came on schedule for them. It has proved so successful that I didn't think twice about buying a third fax machine today. In fact, I'm now convinced that a fax machine should be standard equipment in every supervisor's truck.

Will notebook computers make their way onto our job sites soon? I'm not sure, because I'm not convinced that they would be cost-effective for us. For the cost of one notebook, I can buy ten fax machines. Plus, most of our supervisors have never used a computer, which means we would have to invest in training. But they all use fax machines and they're not intimidated by them; in fact, they like using them. And it took less than ten minutes to train a novice to use one.

That's the reason behind all of our purchasing decisions: Equipment — whether circular saws or fax machines — should assist us in making our working hours more productive and our business more profitable. If it doesn't, who needs it?



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