SMEs take on BIM Challenge

SMEs have fewer chances to get BIM right, but adopting it can help win work, save time and upskill for the future.
SME Spotlight: BIM Special

WHAT YOU SAY

Do you use BIM? If so, how? If not, why not?

STEVE MEDHURST
COMMERCIAL DIRECTOR, W.B. SIMPSON & SONS

No we do not use this — yet. We are a finishing trade that has very little design input that will affect a structure, although this does affect the finished product.

No doubt we will be required to invest in BIM in the near future but which system is the market leader? This is where main contractors will have to invest and take the lead if this is to work; however, this will only apply to future direct government contracts and may not affect a large majority of construction work. I think this is another ‘emperor's new clothes’ scenario.

DEAN WALTON
MARKETING MANAGER, ALUMET

Our design office has started working with BIM and several of our CAD designers are booked on courses.

MARK PITCHER
MANAGING DIRECTOR, C G PITCHER AND SON

We've never used it and are not really sure how it would work on our projects, but are more than open to look at it in practice.

JULIE WHITE
MANAGING DIRECTOR, D DRILL

We use a lot of IT in our business but I can't see us using it — at least in the short and medium term. It still looks rather too much like a way of getting people to spend a lot on IT without a clear payback. We will keep an eye on developments, though.

To contribute your views to SME Spotlight, email katie.barker@emap.com

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SMEs take on BIM challenge

The Government Construction Strategy, published by the Cabinet Office on 31 May 2011, announced the government’s intention to mandate collaborative 3D building information modelling on its projects by 2016.

It is not only the government that is looking at making BIM a requirement; many high-profile clients and contractors are reviewing their BIM strategies and how they can work with their supply chain to create, manage and share information about projects.

BIM is something many SMEs within the industry are considering or would like to be implementing not only for the business benefits, but so they don’t get left behind. Yet the alien terms, cost implications and amount of time available to learn more about new technology often prevent businesses taking their queries any further.

BIM Academy operations director Peter Barker says they have been approached by several SMEs seeking advice regarding BIM. “They might have been intimidated by BIM and worried there are major costs involved, but I think many are beginning to realise the benefits in terms of adding value to their services,” he says. The National Federation of Builders recently ran three workshops for its members with the intention of demystifying BIM, giving SMEs advice on BIM implementation, current drivers and understanding the different applications.

Professor Andrew Thomas, a construction improvement consultant and one of the co-authors of the BIM strategy report published by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in 2011, highlights some of the issues that came up at the seminars.

“The questions raised by those attending seemed to be how and when, not if. But there was also the question of whether clients and main contractors know what they are asking and how to do it,” says Prof Thomas. This concern was also raised by Grant Jefferies, managing director of SME Bray and Slaughter. “We have recently bid a medium-sized design-and-build project and offered a BIM-based solution to the client,” he says. “Unfortunately the client did not seem to be aware of the government’s BIM pledge and the potential value added aspect of the tender was ignored. We have a BIM strategy in place and are currently reviewing how our business can take advantage of developments in public sector procurement.”

“BIM has a wealth of potential benefits for clients, designers, contractors, subcontractors, suppliers and operators, including:

- Improved design reliability;
- Reduced design risk;
- Reduced waste;
- Enhanced co-ordination/fewer errors;
- Higher quality of work;
- Enhanced communication;
- Improved safety;
- Reduction in costs associated with planning, design and construction;
- Improved client engagement;
- Improved planning, control and management of construction.

“BIM benefits projects by allowing quicker decision-making, reduced waste, greater cost certainty and increased profitability,” says Prof Thomas.

David Saffin, senior partner at consulting engineer ZBP, an SME which uses BIM, is unequivocal about the benefits to his business of using the
First steps on the path to BIM

Getting a foothold on the use of BIM can be daunting; Katie Barker spoke to three experts about the best ways to go about it

While many SMEs may already be convinced of the benefits of BIM, taking it from a boardroom discussion to practical business implementation can seem like a big jump. Construction News spoke to three experts who all give slightly different but practical advice for SMEs looking to take the next step with BIM.

The trade association
The National Federation of Builders recently ran three BIM workshops for its members looking to dispel the myths around BIM. They are run by the NFB, funded by ConstructionSkills and delivered by BIS BIM strategy report co-author Professor Andrew Thomas.

Following the workshops, which ran last month, Prof Thomas compiled the following advice for SMEs:
- Don’t bow to short-term pressure from IT salespeople and the market hype;
- Do not assume everything you have in place and are doing is not appropriate to, and supportive of, BIM in future;
- Do take a considered approach to the opportunities and challenges of BIM;
- Understand your own business situation and maturity in the context of BIM – this requires a maturity assessment and competency exercise;
- Understand your clients’ and partners’ competency and expectations with BIM;
- Then take a considered, informed and structured approach to planning what actions, training and investments you need to make to meet those obligations and expectations;
- Excessive paper is becoming a thing of the past – the next generation is virtual and it is fast approaching;
- Understand where the information in BIM is created and provided to the model, and where your position is relative to that – many of the mid-tier companies will be relying on information from others (whether they are designers, constructors or manufacturers);
- BIM is not a new thing; it is a way to do what you do already, better – you can’t go and buy it in a box and just install it.

The academy
Peter Barker is operations director for the BIM Academy, which works with a range of contractors, subcontractors and SMEs to help them implement BIM.

“SMEs need to understand the functionality of each type of software that is relevant to them. They can come to the academy for that advice and the regional BIM hubs are also going to be very helpful for organisations to get impartial advice. Then businesses also need a starting point to understand the business benefits to them.

“For many of those who already understand BIM the stumbling block to implementation is cost, but the way to do it is take the process slowly; buy one licence at a time, upgrade the hardware on one desktop, then identify a champion in the organisation who is really going to understand BIM and then start trialling it.

“The next step is to apply it on a real project and don’t continue in trial mode; you have to try it on a real project and monitor the success of that. There will be difficulties so the challenge is sticking with that trial project, but it’s also important to have people either within the organisation or outside it who can offer support if needed.”

The SME
David Saffin is senior partner at consulting engineer SME firm ZBP, which uses BIM; he is also director of the UK chapter of Building Smart, an alliance of organisations in the construction and FM industries that looks at improving processes within the industry through sharing information.

“There is lots of publicity surrounding BIM, with strange terms and unfamiliar practices; at the moment it’s important for SMEs to be familiar with what’s going on, read lots of articles and go along to seminars and workshops. There are lots of opportunities, but businesses can work their way through from a relatively low beginning; investment in time and training can be controlled.

“The most important thing is taking the first step to finding out more about it – the step between what we’ve been doing on CAD drawings and BIM Level 2 is smaller than going from hand drawings to CAD. I don’t think the step is too big for most organisations who are thinking about their future.

“The Cabinet Office is working to develop a lot of guidance notes on specification and protocols, which are necessary for many firms to find their way through this.

“When those come on stream it will be really helpful for SMEs to see the direction in which it is moving and have a set of rules to work with.

“For the vast majority of the industry, especially the smaller firms, they aren’t going to get too many goes at this, so a clear direction of travel will be helpful.”
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