

Overcoming Employee Resistance to Technology

Construction firms of all sizes are putting jobsite technology, from laser leveling to time tracking, in the hands of construction crews. But, some employees continue to resist change even when it can boost productivity and make their jobs easier.

Resistance to change is a universal workplace challenge, and construction workers present a unique set of circumstances. Many foremen and crewmembers are not comfortable with technology, so companies often approach the introduction of new jobsite IT with apprehension. Age and language are two common issues.

According to the *Construction Chart Book*, the construction workforce is aging. In 2005, the average age of construction workers was 39 years—three years older than two decades ago. In addition, the Hispanic workforce more than tripled to 2.6 million between 1995 and 2005. Computer ownership and literacy are lower among older and immigrant populations, so employers are likely to find that some workers are uneasy about implementing new technology.

In adopting new technology, workers often fear loss of control. Company leaders should develop an implementation strategy that includes helping workers overcome resistance fueled by fear of failure and embarrassment.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

The president of a Chicago-based landscape contracting firm finds that many of the company's younger workers are technically savvy because they have grown up using computers, but the introduction of IT on the job can cause a lot of anxiety for some older workers who aren't computer users.

To address these concerns, the company designates an employee as a product champion each time it rolls out a new technology. The champion provides discreet one-on-one assistance to employees who need help.

Some employers let employees who are eager to try a new technology use it and allow resisters to watch from the sidelines—at least for a while. This philosophy relies on peer influence, assuming that resisters will adopt the new technology once they see coworkers using it with ease.

James Boullemet, director of safety and loss control for Marathon Electrical in Birmingham, Ala., found that some older foremen were apprehensive about using a new time tracking system the company implemented last year. In an effort to make believers out of resisters, the foremen were given new PDAs and thorough training on both the device and the software system.

“The new system was going to dramatically reduce the time and effort foremen invested in paperwork and tracking worker time,” Boullemet says. “But they were risking their authority and relationships with coworkers, so we had to let them know what was in it for them.”

Boullemet says he emphasized to the foremen that the first two weeks on the new system would be tough. The company made every effort to support whatever level of adoption the resisters demonstrated and provided plenty of technical support. As the foremen gained experience and confidence, they began to see the value of the new technology.

Despite research findings, not all construction employers find the implementation of jobsite technology a challenge.

A roofing and renewable energy installation firm based in Irvine, Calif., finds

that construction workers' level of comfort with change is the same as in many other industries. The company approaches technology introductions with a wholehearted commitment from the firm's leadership and communicates upcoming changes with employees well in advance.

Recently, the company deployed a new jobsite technology for field foremen. The firm first launched a month-long pilot program that included weekly conference calls with users. Many issues were resolved during the pilot, making the three-month phased deployment more predictable.

Two months later, the company offered a refresher course to ensure the 85 foremen were making the most of the technology's potential.

As multi-skilling evolves in the construction industry, many workers will be required to use IT on the job, so employers need to plan for some resistance. A report from the SAS Institute, Inc. says employers should recognize the common behavioral signs of resistance: requests for more detail and time to adjust; signs of confusion; attacking the new technology and questioning its practicality; or silence and withdrawal.

Communicating the company's vision for the future is critical to enlisting support. Company leaders should set a good example by becoming actively involved in sponsoring technology introductions and modeling the behavior they desire from their employees. Making workers feel comfortable with their new tools will go a long way toward the successful adoption of IT.

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