

The Strategic Project Record

by Terri Lindow, Contract Solutions Group

Everyone is as busy as they've ever been. In this setting, technical work naturally takes priority, leaving little time to pay attention to project documentation. The end result is that often only invoicing, deliverables and piecemeal correspondence are left to represent the project history.

THE DEFENSIVE PROJECT RECORD

So what is the minimum that should go into a project record? If you do nothing else, protect yourself from claims. Documenting options, decisions, decision makers, and reasons for reaching those decisions are of particular importance.

Disputes do occur and the ability to protect your organization and the professional reputation of your personnel is dependent on what your staff recorded three, five, 10 or more years ago. Project records carry greater evidentiary weight than do the subjective memories of project personnel.

Having quality documentation will reduce legal preparatory costs of re-creating project histories and will greatly enhance the quality of your defense.

THE COMPLETE PROJECT RECORD

Is your project record comprised of what you find in the project manager's office at project end? If so, you are missing valuable information that passes across the project team's desks every day.

Complete project records document daily events, paying particular attention to choices made and decision points. Other data captured includes information towards proving or disproving change, cost and schedule creep, billing/payment problems and performance issues. Reviewing these lessons learned to gauge accuracy of scope and pricing on future projects is one of the most valuable uses of project records.

Project information can also be utilized to identify lowball, change order contractors and other behaviors to be actively managed, to identify problem personnel, or to document reasons to disqualify problem organizations. Repeat work from a prime who rejected all requests for time and price adjustments out of hand, regardless of merit, or from an owner who is extremely slow to pay, may be clients too costly to work for.

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THE STRATEGIC PROJECT RECORD

The strategic project record includes the defensive records and daily project information listed above and also captures proactive information for marketing, sales and human resources.

A vast amount of strategic intelligence is available from the project record. Unusual projects and specific skills acquired by personnel should be passed along to marketing and sales to market the new skills or unique achievements of your staff.

THE EXCLUSIONARY PROJECT RECORD

Thoughtful record keeping requires awareness on the part of the entire project team, not only of what goes into the project record, but what to exclude. As contents of project records contain the potential to sink the ship, personnel must be educated regarding how to treat sensitive information.

Number one on this list is avoiding non-factual information. Comments outside the project work have no place in the project record. Most disputes arise out of communication errors. A dispute can escalate during the exchange of records in formal disputes such as litigation or arbitration when a damaging comment is found in a project record. The settlement value of a claim when a client has seemingly damaging data increased dramatically.

Some projects call for a professional opinion,

usually a formal report, as part of the design process. In this instance you are paid to provide a specific opinion under limited and carefully evaluated conditions and carry contractual liability protections for this opinion. No other opinions belong in the project record.



E-mail is a particular hazard, where the medium is casual. Users tend to fire off quick notes that can easily be misinterpreted and damage your reputation or otherwise used against you in a dispute or claims situation.

Personnel should also be educated on the legal status and document retention guidelines of off-site and personal files, which are rarely privacy-protected.

SUMMARY

The goal of a project record should be to provide a real-time record of project events that offers a full picture of project events years after project

ARE YOUR PROJECT FILES COMPLETE?

- Proposal with scope of work
- Signed contract/agreement
- Subcontractor contracts and bids
- Subcontractor Certificates of Insurance
- Site Investigation Reports
- Zoning Approvals, Permits
- Confirmation of Utility Location
- Tracking reports – RFIs, Shop Drawings, Schedule, Budget
- Meeting minutes
- Change orders with client approvals
- Daily field reports
- Labeled photographs
- Incoming letters/faxes/transmittals
- Outgoing letters/faxes/transmittals
- Telephone memorandums
- Internal memos and notes
- Email correspondence
- Client deliverables
- Quality assurance/quality control records, peer review documentation

personnel have moved on to other projects or organizations.

Though the project is the realm of the project manager, the project record belongs to the orga-

nization. Staff may need an occasional reminder that records must be kept to an organizational standard as well as a personal standard. The protections provided through full project documentation are beneficial and necessary to protect the health of the organization.

Project records may outlast our careers with our firms and should be compiled with that in mind. Organizations should have standards for both documentation and long term storage. Consult with your legal advisors for a balance. Purposeful project records provide lasting protection, useful human resources and industry intelligence, and fewer sleepless nights.

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