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Partnerships in the Cloud Create a Happy Work-Life Balance for Architects

(<https://linespacespace.com/work-life-balance-for-architects/>)



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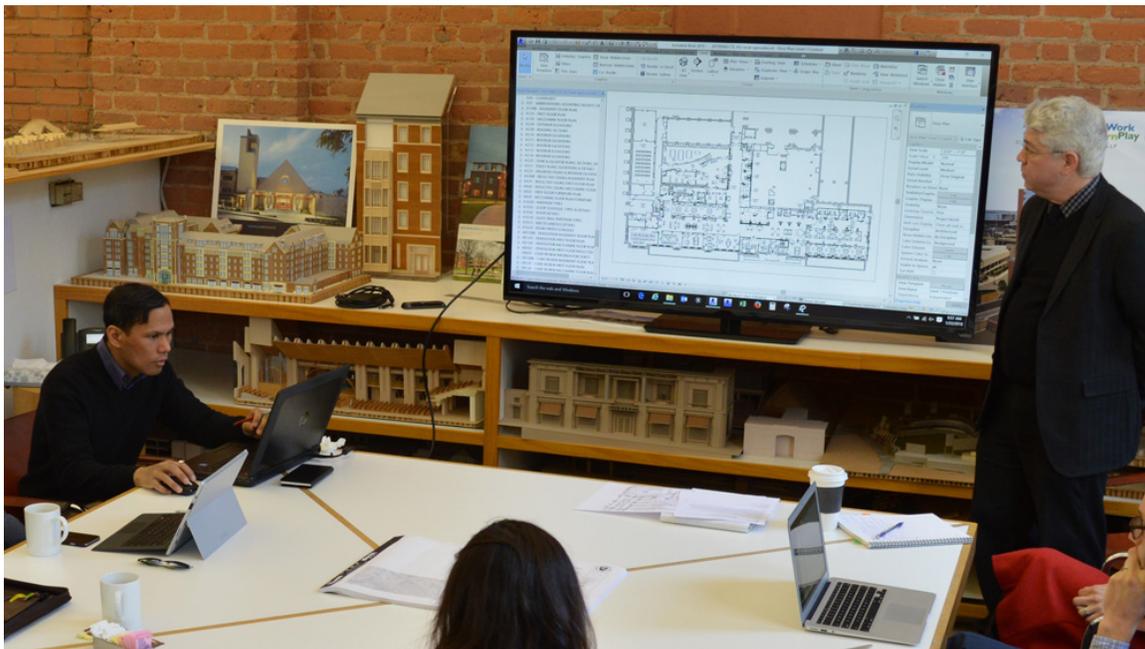
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During the Great Recession (<http://stateofworkingamerica.org/great-recession/>) of 2008, work dried up for New Haven, Connecticut–based firm Newman Architects (<http://www.newmanarchitects.com/>). To survive, it had to secure work by partnering with firms in other cities.

“Local projects were pretty scarce, so we teamed up with a firm in Oklahoma to do a university residential project there,” says BIM Manager Leo Gonzales. “The firm contacted ours because we have a lot of experience doing college residential dormitories. And in general, firms are partnering with other firms with specializations to get and win projects that require it.”

This strategy proved fruitful, and partnering with out-of-state firms has remained a major strategy for Newman—even now that the recession is over. “Since 2008, there have been fewer projects and more architects going after the same projects,” says Newman Director of IT Jeff Cap. “Teaming is critical.”



Collaboration meeting about the Yale University Center for Teaching and Learning project, led by project manager Howard Hebel. Courtesy Newman Architects.

Partnering with other firms isn't possible without a technical solution for sharing the work. At first, Newman would keep the project until the design-development phase was over and then hand it off to the partner firm for the construction-document (<http://www.aia.org/aiaucmp/groups/aia/documents/pdf/aiab097627.pdf>) and construction-administration (<http://blog.archability.com/?p=331>) phases. But that collaboration method was disjointed.

Newman then tried using virtual workstations that could access a remote server, but that method wasn't scalable. “We were working with another architect in Connecticut through a virtual workstation,” Cap says. “We wanted to add two more people to the

project, but the partnering firm balked because it would cost them too much to add two more virtual workstations. As a result, one individual had to work a lot of overtime to avoid the extra costs of hardware.”

So what does a firm do when it needs partnerships to get the work but can't afford the hardware upgrades? Enter cloud-based technology: a scalable solution that doesn't require expensive, limiting hardware. “During the course of a project, your team expands,” Gonzales says. “It can go from five people in one firm to 30 across many different firms and disciplines by the end. So we used Autodesk Collaboration for Revit (<http://www.autodesk.com/products/collaboration-for-revit/overview>), which allows your team or contract to expand as your project develops.”

The software also helped Newman expand the types of projects it does and land big jobs it couldn't win alone as a midsize firm. “We'll team up with architects who specialize in building types like stadiums or something as specific as nursing schools to compete on those projects,” Gonzales says.



Rendering of the Fairfield School of Nursing in Fairfield, Connecticut. Courtesy Newman Architects.

The advent of cloud-based software tools not only made it easier for Newman to partner with other architecture firms but also transformed the way the firm works internally and with consultants. The technology allows different people to access the same file stored in the cloud and make changes in real time. “We're not wasting time sending drawing files back and forth,” Gonzales says. “This cuts down on excuses, improves communication, and saves money.”

Gonzales recalls an incident in which a design architect changed the column layout on a project, and an hour later, the structural engineer called because he noticed it right away. "If we weren't working with Collaboration for Revit, it would have taken several weeks to work that out," he says. But because the structural engineer was working on the same file as the architect and could see live updates, there wasn't a time lag in communicating the change. "Synchronizing the files is no problem with Collaboration," Gonzales says. "It actively syncs and is almost seamless."

Cloud-based collaboration even changed the culture of the firm, improving the work-life balance for architects and employees. "It allows you to work from anywhere you have a high-speed Internet connection, whether that be the job trailer or your home," Cap says. This flexibility prompted the firm to replace desktop computers with laptops for all their employees so they can work from anywhere. It also eliminates the need for colocation (<https://lineshapespace.com/lean-construction/>).



3D drawing of the Hotchkiss School in Lakeville, Connecticut. Courtesy Newman Architects.

"Being able to work from home helps with the morale of our firm," Cap says. "Having the flexibility to work from home after dinner, for example, is great. A lot of people like to do work after the kids are in bed, and with the technology we have, they don't have to come into the office to be able to do that." And because many of the firm's projects are out-of-state, cloud-based collaboration also cuts down on travel costs.

It has even had a positive impact on the construction-administration phase because it is easier to issue revisions to the drawings as changes come up during construction. "If you have high-speed Internet on the job site, and you go out there with a notebook, you can access the model from there and issue [new] sketches," Gonzales says.

Cloud-based technology helped Newman with business development during and after a recession—giving the firm access to bigger and more varied projects across the country—and also helped retain employees and made it easier to work with consultants. As a result, Cap said Newman acquired a Collaboration for Revit license for almost every employee: “We can’t imagine how we lived without it now.”



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