Georgia Homebuilder Has Designs on Greater Efficiency through docSTAR

Duluth, GA-based CCM Homes is part of the remarkable growth taking place in Atlanta's northeastern suburbs. And docSTAR is helping fuel that growth, according to CCM's Mark Turner. Turner, who handles technology and other administrative functions for the homebuilder, says docSTAR has helped make his firm's move into the 21st century a bit easier.

CCM Homes is a Certified Professional Homebuilder and a member of the Greater Atlanta Homebuilders Association. The firm has earned multiple Gold and Silver Professionalism Awards – six Gold and two Silver in 2005 alone – from the Atlanta homebuilders group. And it has done so with just 20 employees and a healthy dose of technological support.

According to Turner, the company relies quite heavily on technology to keep the operation lean, yet effective. Administrative support and automation – including a digital document filing and retrieval system from docSTAR – are tools that exist, in large part, to assist builders out in the field. "We in the office provide the tools, systems and processes to help them build a better house," he says of the builders. "It frees them up from all the administrative stuff, and lets them focus on building the house correctly and managing the sub-contractors."

Tech Driven
Supervisors in the field each have a laptop and people in-house have either a laptop or a workstation. CCM's successful automation deployment – including centralizing data on a Microsoft Small Business Server – led to it being featured by Microsoft as an organization that has benefited from application of technology. "The guys in the field use PDAs, and they sync up all their data files and anything they might need access to on the job," he says. "We also use Blackberrys, and everybody's email goes right to them wherever they are. So anything that goes through their Microsoft Outlook box gets pushed out to their Blackberry."

Deploying docSTAR technology was a natural progression for the technology-driven firm. "The docSTAR solution was part of a company-wide initiative to go paperless," Turner says. It's another way the company can equip its field staff with information they need to do their jobs. "The big thing docSTAR does for us is it makes all of the documents we process available to everybody at any given time," he says. This includes everything from house model information to sales contracts, contractor quotes, budgets, and much more.

Before going with docSTAR, documents – lots of them – were all stored in file cabinets or boxes. "And a file drawer is not very accessible to a guy that's building houses up in Gainesville, 50 or 60 miles away," Turner says. Now field staff can sit with a laptop in the cab of a truck in a new home community. Most of CCM's communities are either a hot zone, which is set up to allow wireless, or at a minimum they have a DSL connection in the model home.

This allows access, via a high-speed Internet connection, directly into the docSTAR server at the home office, and provides the ability to retrieve forms and documents using the Web interface. But the benefits reach deeper into the organization than just construction managers. "The docSTAR system allows us to archive nearly everything, and it allows us to eliminate the manual tasks of filing and retrieving documents," Turner says. "Of course, there's a bit of a tradeoff with the time it takes to scan. But at the end of the day, it's a lot more efficient and effective to scan than it is to file paper."

According to Turner, nearly all documents except large building or development plans are put into docSTAR. That includes everything from the zoning and building permits, to the contracts and, once a house is sold, any amendments that come in. During the permitting and sale process, a number of documents are created, and docSTAR offers a way to keep these organized and readily accessible throughout the organization.

Financial Focus

CCM has found document imaging to be particularly useful when it comes to managing accounting transactions. "We're scanning all of our invoices now," Turner says. "We pay our subs every two weeks using an outside firm to handle all of our payables. When the invoices and check stubs come back from the outside firm, it shows what has been paid and who it has been paid to. We simply scan the invoices into docSTAR, along with a copy of the check stub."

This lets office staff cross-reference payment information. If they have a check number, for instance, it is easy to find the invoice. If they know the invoice number, it is possible to find when it was paid – all through docSTAR. "That's a huge deal for us," Turner says, "because we have about 150 vendors we pay every two weeks, so the amount of paper this created was enormous. Now we can scan all that and not mess with filing it."

"If the builder on a jobsite needs to see an invoice or if somebody in the office needs to pull something up, it's there," Turner says. "Before, because it was all kept at this outside firm, we either had to shoot an email to them or call somebody on the phone and have them look it up for us and then send it. It was kind of a hassle. Now it is readily available for our people. It works out really well. It puts all information at everybody's fingertips."

Scanning and imaging also support the flexible nature of the homebuilding business. "We scan all of the quotes that come in," Turner says, "and that's a lot to manage, particularly when things change." One of CCM's requirements is that subcontractors fill out a trade contract agreement (TCA), along with a quote for whatever work they are looking to do. "When the homebuilder starts a new subdivision or a new project, or when we change subcontractors, we receive a lot of TCAs and quotes, and all of that gets scanned. This makes managing the process that much easier."

Managing insurance is another area of much needed control. All subcontractors are required to maintain adequate insurance – general liability and workers comp. At CCM, all of the subcontractor insurance certificates get scanned and housed electronically. That helps not only in daily operations, but especially at audit time. "About every quarter, we have an audit by our insurance company," Turner says. "Our carrier wants to make sure the subs we're using are covered correctly. Now all of the insurance forms are scanned in, so it is a matter of just sitting down with the auditor in front of a computer screen. He gives us a list of who he wants to see, and we pull it right up. Before docSTAR, we had to thumb through a stack of insurance certificates." And of course, the auditors never ask for the certificates in the order in which they were filed. No more, 'It's in here somewhere.'

Signing on

Turner says the process of converting to docSTAR was rather painless. The local docSTAR dealer was good to work with, he says, handling the standard installation, as well as helping set up templates and indexing protocols for the firm. "We deal with a lot of changes every day," Turner says. "And we add communities and building lots at least quarterly. At the front end, I was concerned that the creation and maintenance of templates could be cumbersome. So we bought a piece of software from our docSTAR dealer that allows us to interface, and do a nightly update with an Excel spreadsheet that feeds docSTAR a lot of this information. So we do not have to go in and touch every template every time we add a vendor, a community or a new lot. Setting this up ahead of time took a little extra work, but it paid off rather quickly."

For the most part, staff buy-in was fast and strong. As is often the case with any change, some people are more reluctant. At CCM, some of the sales agents had a hard time letting go of paper. "One agent was really concerned about the legality of scanning a blue-ink contract and then shredding it," Turner recalls. "She was really nervous

about that." The docSTAR rep came out and shared the legal precedents, and explained how to comply with applicable laws.

Turner finds it not surprising that sales people in remote offices might be more resistant. "Our sales agents are not administrative by nature, and some of them just didn't understand what it was going to do for us," he says. "If they spent a week in this office and saw all of the paper that comes through, and what it takes just to pull up a contract or some other document, they would understand it better." But they are buying in. "The confidence level is going up," Turner notes. "The big thing is to make sure that, when they want to look up something, they know it's in there and they can find it." And that's happening.

As is also the case when change takes place, it is important to have support from the top. And it is sometimes tough to know where the top brass stand on an issue. That was not a problem at CCM. "Our owner, Charles Ray, has been probably the most receptive to it," Turner says. "He really thinks it's the way to go, and he's been a strong advocate."

Reaping benefits
According to Turner, the number one benefit of going with docSTAR is enhanced accessibility of information and documents. "Next to that would be space savings," he says. The bankers boxes that the company uses to store invoices are becoming scarcer around CCM. "We've been known to have these boxes all over the place," he says. "We're a small company, and we don't have a huge office building. So every time we have to add a file cabinet or a bankers box, it ends up going into somebody's office. That becomes a problem, too, because you are interrupting someone when you are trying to get into a file cabinet." CCM is going back and archiving 2005 invoices and, of course, scanning all 2006 invoices as they come in. So the issue is resolving itself quickly.

Financial benefits are also part of the mix. "Long-term cost savings should be huge," Turner says, "not so much in the time it takes to file versus scan, but the cost savings will come in trying to track something down. Things get misfiled and it is a lot easier to log in to docSTAR and find a document than it is to try and track a file down. Increased productivity is going to add up over time." That is especially valuable when you consider builders 20 miles away on a jobsite need quick access to accurate information, and the time needed to do manual lookups is huge in that scenario.

Going forward, Turner expects to see even greater payback. "The next thing we want to be able to do is, for instance, have the insurance company auditor call us ahead of time and give us a list of what he wants to see," he says. "Then we can just email him copies or zip them up and send a zip file to him."

The company also is looking to push its vendors to a more automated and digital work environment. "We've always felt like we were ahead of the curve in the things we're doing," he says. "Now we are trying to move our vendors into working the same way." The company has set up a dedicated email address – its' preference – and a fax number that delivers faxes via email, so invoices and communications can go to a central location. They plan to expand that functionality to drive automation of other communication. Then, they will work to integrate the incoming information into their standard workflows, with docSTAR as the hub.

The firm also has a new purchasing database it is implementing. The software it uses to link the database with docSTAR will allow for streamlined work processes and efficiency gains there, as well. Under the new scenario, all purchase orders, budgeting information and other purchasing related items will be archived on the docSTAR server.

Turner sees docSTAR as an important part of his company's future. But not just his own; he sees it as improving efficiencies across his industry. "It's a great product, and going paperless is a great initiative," he says. "It's where everybody needs to be heading. I know a lot of people are moving in that direction. But it's something that is new to this business. The electronic age just hasn't quite taken over this industry yet. But it will." And the homebuilding business will benefit.