Using Apps to Solve Key Issues for your Construction Clients

MODERATOR: Heather Satterley

PANELISTS

Tonya Schulte: Schulte and Schulte, LLC

Karine Woodman: 24hr Bookkeeper

Vic Madeira: ACS, Inc

intuit **quickbooks**
CONNECT

OWN THE FUTURE

Tonya Schulte, Schulte and Schulte, LLC

Are most construction apps one size fits all for every company in the construction field?

NO! I can't repeat it enough – the first thing you should decide when serving construction clients is which type of construction industry companies will you serve. Commercial and residential construction companies typically have different needs. Whether or not your clients just do service calls or offer new construction services or some mix of both plays a part in what apps they need as does whether they are a general contractor or a specialty trade subcontractor.

What features are most important when picking an app for a construction company?

This goes back to the first question. It all depends greatly on exactly what type of construction company you are planning to serve. If you are working with a field service client (i.e. HVAC service, plumbing service, electrical service, etc.) – basically any company that goes out and performs maintenance, service, and repair work on pre-existing installations – then a field service management program to handle the typically large amount of parts and services that will also help you to schedule and bill each service call is pretty much essential. For a less parts heavy client, something like Jobber should be sufficient. For a parts and labor heavy client, we like IFSM (Intuit Field Service Management) or (for heavy residential service work) ServiceTitan. If your client is a residential builder or remodeler, they will likely need to track a large number of phases on each project and they may also want to look for an end-user-feature-rich software which will allow their customers to have their pick of finishes (tile, wallpaper, windows, etc.) right through the app. For a commercial GC, heavy project management features will be key. Their needs will vary, but they will likely want something which allows them to manage AIA style billings, Gantt Chart style scheduling, etc.

If an app says it is QBO integrated that means that it will work perfectly with QBO and I won't have to do anything besides hook it up plug-and-play style, right?

Hahahahahaha! Ahem. It is very important to understand exactly how apps may integrate with QBO. Is there a one-way sync? If so, which way does the information flow? Is there a two-way sync? If so, what information flows back and forth? Beyond knowing which way information flows, you will also need to understand how much mapping of fields needs to be done in order for that information to flow smoothly. This is where a lot of testing comes into play. Many of the app partners offer great customer service for setup for you and your clients, but I prefer to know ahead of time of how the mapping works and potential pitfalls when it comes to integration. Testing and pre-integration evaluation is KEY!

How do you go about evaluating and testing apps for your construction clients?

We pay for a separate QBO subscription and ask our app partners for a free test account to hook up to that QBO subscription. That way whenever a client or potential client wants to know if an app we already work with or some new app will solve a specific issue, we can usually test it in real time.

Tonya Schulte, Schulte and Schulte, LLC

Who will mostly use integrated apps? The client or the accounting partner or both?

This is a very good thing to understand before suggesting app connections to clients as well and another reason we like to do extensive testing. It is important to understand:

1. The needs of your client
2. The problem that the potential app proposes to solve
3. The desired outcome (what does the solution look like.)

As a for instance – if you have a client who does commercial subcontract work and needs AIA style billing, wants to schedule their employees in app, and also has percentage of completion reporting requirements, you would NOT want to suggest that they use an app that is made to track service type work such as IFSM. You would want to look for an app that includes those features such as Knowify.

How do you know what apps do what and what features they include?

A good place to start is on apps.com, of course.

Take a look at what the app developer lists as features. Beyond that, check out the reviews from others on that site. Does what they have to say back up the feature claims made by the developer? Because you are here at the conference, you will often have a chance to actually look at the app at the vendor booth, ask questions about scenarios specific to your firm and your clients, and usually even get a demo. Beyond that, ask for a more in-depth demo after you get back to your office – include any key players such as others in your firm who will implement and/or use the apps, and maybe even your main client contact if it is going to be a very client specific app. Beyond that, as I said before test, test, test on a testing setup. Use real world example to setup scenarios and test how they play out when the app is integrated in your testing environment.

Do you only use apps that are "construction specific" with your construction clients?

Absolutely not.

We build out tech stacks based both on industry and task needs. One of our favorite stacks is QBO, Knowify, Hubdoc. Knowify's two-way sync, coupled with Hubdocs one-way sync allows the apps to work together the way that we prefer for client workflow. Just because your client is in the construction industry, don't be afraid to look into apps that serve even other industries. (Did you know that Knowify originally planned to serve other industries such as the legal field?) Sometimes a problem faced in one industry can be solved by an app created for another industry or a non-industry specific app.

Karine Woodman, 24hr Bookkeeper

What is important to ask a client when helping them choose a construction app?

It's important to ask a lot of questions related to their everyday workflow. It's definitely important to start with the type of construction they provide but it goes further than that. You should ask questions such as how they produce their billing, identify what the relationship look like with their customers and vendors. What I mean is to identify the 'how' as this this help identify the functionality that you need these apps to provide for the client. If you get a good understanding of what they are doing daily, weekly and monthly, this will help identify functionality within apps that are needed to streamline and automate their existing process. It's easier to figure out what they need as they explain to you their normal workflows. It's also important to ask them about their reporting requirements as some apps provide more reporting options over others.

Do you use any specific apps to communicate and/or work with your construction client?

We use a number of internal apps to communicate with our clients. I wouldn't say they are construction specific applications but more typical for a streamlined workflow for a great client relationship. We use slack as a direct channel of communication, Dropbox for business to load and share documents, LastPass as a password manager and of course, we work in the client's construction project management software and QuickBooks Online.

How long does it take to truly implement a construction management software?

I typically tell the client to realistically expect 6-8 months of implementation before they can feel like everyone in the company is comfortable with it. This is for companies with multiple employees of course. The majority of the work comes on the project management side, such as setting up and implementing estimating, document management, reporting and financial functionality within the application itself. When it comes to bookkeeping, it is usually the easier portion as it only involves 1-2 people. The client has to recognize that they are going from working within one software to two and it takes time to implement new company workflow functionality. This includes changing the way they do things, including who might be actually doing what work and where it gets entered. It takes less time if this is for a sole owner/operator.

Why would a construction client even consider using additional software with QuickBooks?

The client needs to understand that QuickBooks has a lot of functionality as a stand alone product but it's main purpose is to be a "financial" software. This means that QuickBooks doesn't provide additional, industry specific functionality like document storage, customer portals or vendor communication, for example. This means that the additional construction software is complimentary to QuickBooks, meaning it adds functionality that QuickBooks doesn't offer in its software. The reason you would also setup an integration between two software programs is to avoid double entry of financial data. You need to record the transactions in QuickBooks, as well as some areas of the project management software; so connecting them only requires you to enter it once…

Karine Woodman, 24hr Bookkeeper

If your client wants to truly grow their construction business, they need to consider using additional software. If they only use QuickBooks, that's fine, but they are likely already using additional things like excel for estimating and word for proposals. Additional software for give them an all-in-one solution to compliment QuickBooks.

What is the best way to get educated on construction applications?

Typically, the place to start would be to go to apps.com and find out what apps have already completed Intuit's required security criteria. I'd look at the reviews and go to the app website and search the functionality that software offers. I also suggest you setup a demo with the sales team. That gives you a great opportunity to ask specific questions one-on-one. Many software apps have videos that explain functionality. Another other thing I can suggest is to try a free trial and test it out. You'll find that as long as you can understand 'how' the integration works, you just need to learn which construction client is the best fit for that software and understand the functionary around it.

Vic Madeira, ACS, Inc

What are your favorite apps for construction?

Working with construction clients for years, one of the most pressing issues they share with me is how they can improve the communication between the field staff, clients, and the office staff. This communication is key as a projects profit (or loss) is often determined by decisions made in the field and not communicated timely or at all with the office staff.

With this need in mind, one of my favorite apps to recommend is, CoConstruct. This app does:

- Estimating
- Scheduling
- Budgets and job costing

Solving these needs helps my client make better decisions during the progress of the job, instead of waiting until the project is completed.

How do I start a conversation with a new construction client?

I need to approach a new client as a consultant and forget that you are a financial advisor or bookkeeper. You need to know everything about their construction business. Here is what I need to know…

Vic Madeira, ACS, Inc

Of the questions below, which if any, are they looking to solve.

How do you get your clients? Are they from referrals, advertising, real estate agents? I need to know this so I can know if they are going to get a formal contract. Are they going to send a bid from QBO? Are they wanting to track bids that are active or rejected? Perhaps an app like Knowify might solve for these needs.

What do you use for estimating and scheduling? How confident are they in their estimating skills? Is their estimating effort scalable? Or does one employee have this info "in his/her head". By searching out specific apps for these functions, I can help my client do a better job estimating and thereby be more profitable. Some can take advantage of the many estimating apps available. Estimating is not the same as estimates in QBO.

How are your current budgets created and how are costs against the budget tracked, is your current process working, if not, what element is missing? How will they enter the budget into QBO? Are items being used properly?

What type of contractor are they? General Contractor that subcontracts out the work, or a Specialty Contractor that self-performs the job tasks? If a GC, how are they controlling the commitment of costs. You need to pick the right app that gives them this type of reporting.

If they are a specialty contractor self-performing, how are they handling time tracking. Contractors such as excavators own or rent equipment that has to be tracked by the piece of equipment and what jobs they are used on. They may need to track hours on each piece of equipment.

Do you self perform? Does the client have employees that work on the jobs? Perhaps they use subcontractors instead? How do they track the subs bids? If the client has employees that generate hours for job costing are they using Tsheets? Is payroll done inside or outside of QBO. This determines whether you have self performed labor costs going to the jobs or not.

How do you review job costs on active jobs? If the client doesn't track jobs or projects in QBO and check their reports they won't know how they are currently measuring up to their budgets. Some apps that provide good reporting on this are Knowify and Red Team software. Of course CoConstruct and Builder Trend are also excellent choices. A profit and Loss by job report are a post mortem report for a job that's finished.

How do you invoice a customer? Are you cost plus? Loan draws? Progress billing? AIA G702 and G703 forms? The answer will help you choose applications that will provide the right type of invoice and push that into QBO. Red Team Software, QBO, CoConstruct and builder Trend are all excellent at this.