

Consulting Firm Improves Collaboration, Ups Revenues by Harnessing Business Information

Overview

Country or Region: United States

Industry: Professional services—
Consulting

Customer Profile

Gafcon is a construction management consulting firm. The company was founded in 1987, has 120 employees, and offices in San Diego, Los Angeles, and Orange County, California.

Business Situation

Gafcon wanted to use capabilities in Microsoft® Office SharePoint® Server 2007 to tap into valuable business information, integrate data from different business systems, and improve collaboration.

Solution

Gafcon used Office SharePoint Server 2007 to connect people and teams to collaborate on client projects and to provide centralized access to information from disparate business systems.

Benefits

- Better information, faster delivery time
- Higher productivity, higher revenue
- Expanded business opportunities

“Thanks to SharePoint Server 2007, we have valuable business information on hand, in dashboards, in real time. This advantage, beyond a doubt, helps us successfully compete against much bigger players.”

Yehudi Gaffen, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Gafcon

Gafcon, a program and construction management firm, wanted to improve accessibility to information to streamline business processes and serve its clients more efficiently. Using Microsoft® Office SharePoint® Server 2007, Gafcon implemented intranet, extranet, and industry-specific business solutions that provide employees and clients with real-time access to information from any location. With immediate insight into its business data, Gafcon is able to track and report on key information faster and more accurately, including billable hours and employee progress on client projects. This has resulted in an approximate 10 percent increase in revenue. The company also used a solution built on Office SharePoint Server 2007 to become a provider of building inspections for the insurance industry, resulting in a substantial increase in revenue in less than one year.

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Situation

Gafcon, a Southern California-based program and construction management consulting firm, provides a range of services in construction, program and project management, and construction-related claims support. A recipient of numerous industry awards, the 120-employee firm includes many development and construction experts and has offices in San Diego, Los Angeles, and Orange County.

From its inception, Gafcon differentiated itself from other firms by investing in IT in order to compete successfully against industry heavyweights with significantly greater resources. Yehudi Gaffen, co-founder and Chief Executive Officer of Gafcon, says, “We recognized that in order to compete successfully, we had to add value beyond just the human resource aspect. We began delving into technology to gain an advantage.”

Gafcon identified collaboration technology as critical to achieving higher efficiency and better client connections, and, as early as 2001, began using Microsoft® SharePoint® Products and Technologies. By 2004, the company had implemented an intranet based on Microsoft Office SharePoint Portal Server 2003. The intranet, named eGafcon, replaced all of the company’s file shares with SharePoint document lists and libraries. “The new intranet really changed the landscape at Gafcon. It made information clearly accessible to everyone,” says Paul West, Principal, SharePoint360, a separately-owned technology consulting firm that began as a SharePoint Products and Technologies deployment group within Gafcon, and which helped Gafcon develop and deploy the intranet.

In 2007, when the company upgraded to Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007, it also created a client extranet—a part of

eGafcon—that enables the company to share project documents, drawings, diagrams, budget information, and status updates with current and prospective clients on Web-based SharePoint sites. eGafcon now includes seven years of documentation, stored in more than 3,000 sites, and amounting to more than 700 gigabytes (GB) of data. It also offers numerous workspaces, for everything from collaborating on project proposals and contracts, to accessing human resources (HR) information and accounting data, to ad hoc team sites that help bring disparate people and resources together for work on client projects. Gafcon has invited approximately 2,000 clients to eGafcon extranet sites to view and share information.

The company’s experience with SharePoint Products and Technologies has been so successful, that, in 2006, the Gafcon IT team responsible for implementing SharePoint Products and Technologies, was spun off into the consulting firm called SharePoint360. Cliff Smeed, Principal, SharePoint360, says, “When we were still a part of Gafcon, we got so many inquiries about our own use of SharePoint Products and Technologies from companies involved in the business of construction. It only made sense to form a separate entity focused on helping other businesses take advantage of this technology.”

But Gafcon needed to take its collaboration environment to the next level. Although eGafcon provides client access to project information, the company also wanted to display and work with information from third-party systems, such as enterprise project management software, within Office SharePoint Server 2007. “Anyone who needed access to construction contract information within an external system would have had to have a license to that third-party software. Not to mention training in how to use the system,” says Smeed. The company

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also wanted to capitalize on the enhanced business intelligence features of Office SharePoint Server 2007, to improve management of company resources and provide better, more detailed reporting to clients.

Solution

Gafcon continued its work with SharePoint360, a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner, to further simplify collaboration among employees and with external business partners, streamline business processes, and more easily view and share information, through business intelligence dashboards and customized reports, from data sources in third-party business systems. In addition, it implemented a mobile solution that has enabled the company to tap an entirely new revenue stream.

Simplifying Project Management

Kristine Legaspi, Marketing Director at Gafcon, is in charge of producing the company's proposals for new projects. She says, “Data collection is so important. Before SharePoint Server, we would have to send e-mails to up to 40 different people, internally and externally, to collect the information we needed to create a proposal. We had to worry about file sizes and e-mail server message size limitations.” With Office SharePoint Server 2007, Legaspi has new and improved capabilities that she can use to easily initiate new proposals and track each proposal through the production process.

When starting a proposal, Legaspi creates a SharePoint site on eGafcon using a customized site template that includes a document library, built-in workflows, and other elements that support the company's proposal production process. Legaspi invites consultants to the new site. These consultants include Gafcon employees and outside consultants who engage with Gafcon

on a per project basis. As site administrator, Legaspi controls participant access, assigning each contributor with a permissions level that ranges from Read (can see content but not make changes to it), to Contributor (can view and edit content) to Full Control (can adjust permissions for other contributors). This flexibility allows her to delegate permissions based on each person's role in the process. She also employs out-of-the-box workflows to engage contributors in all stages of document review and approval processes.

Using the SharePoint site, Legaspi also can easily track each person's progress. Not only can she see the most recent changes made to a document or proposal, Legaspi can stay on top of the proposal process by setting alerts, which deliver notification to her through e-mail when a contributor has uploaded information to the site, such as architectural or engineering drawings needed to complete a proposal. Legaspi also receives messages when changes have been made to the draft proposal or to supporting documentation stored in the document library.

The company's Project Management Services department, responsible for the planning, direction, and coordination of resources throughout a client project, also uses eGafcon. Projects involve many participants—the project owner, the construction project management team, engineers, contractors, and architects. Participants work from many different locations and include Gafcon employees, clients, and outside consultants. Many of these people also rely on industry-specific applications such as Expedition program management software from Primavera Systems (now owned by Oracle). The construction management team uses Expedition, to manage Requests for Information (RFIs), submittals, invoices, and contract change orders. “Expedition enables some collaboration between the construction

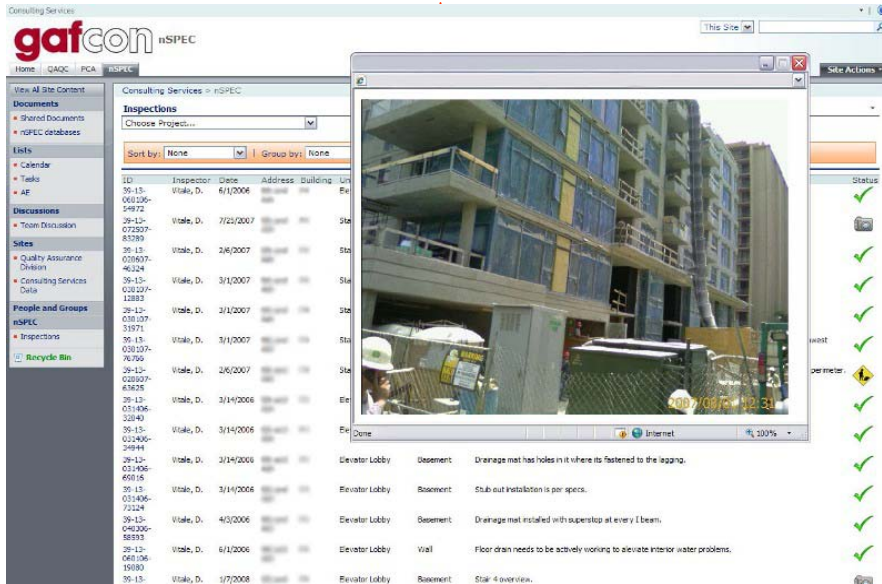


Figure 2. nSpec building inspection reports on Office SharePoint Server 2007 site.

2007 ties all of these systems together, and provides a central point of access.”

Breaking New Ground

In 2005, in the midst of a Southern California construction boom, Gafcon identified a new business opportunity. “We wanted to take advantage of our expertise in construction forensics and building inspections to become a third-party provider of inspection services for insurance carriers,” says Ted Bumgardner, Gafcon Principal, and Vice President of the company’s Consulting Services department.

The service, called nSpec, is built on Office SharePoint Server 2007. It begins from an extranet site on eGafcon where potential clients enter information, including project size and timing that Gafcon uses to formulate a quote for the inspection service. Once a quote is accepted, inspectors are dispatched to the client’s construction site, and, using a camera-enabled, handheld Windows Mobile® device, the inspector enters reports, complete with color photos, which are automatically uploaded to a central SharePoint site. From this site, clients can

monitor building conditions and progress made towards resolution of issues. Thanks to integration with Microsoft SQL Server® 2005 Reporting Services and SQL Server 2005 Analysis Services, Bumgardner says, “these reports are highly detailed—the client and the insurance carrier can see which issues are open, how long they’ve been open, and when they get resolved.”

Benefits

Gafcon has realized numerous benefits from its extensive use of Office SharePoint Server 2007. The company has improved team collaboration, and as a consequence, projects run more smoothly and reach completion faster. By taking advantage of new and enhanced business intelligence features, Gafcon has improved productivity, employee accountability—and revenues. Gafcon also expanded its services and tapped a new revenue stream by implementing an integrated mobile solution based on Office SharePoint Server 2007.

Better Information, Faster Delivery Times

Gafcon has come a long way from its old practice of sharing project documents and files through e-mail. eGafcon, built on Office SharePoint Server 2007, helps the company keep all documents in a central location. “If someone goes missing from a project team, their information doesn’t also go missing, the way it used to when it was stored on individuals’ local hard drives. With SharePoint Server 2007, information is available to all members of the team when they need it,” says Fuller. Legaspi adds, “Producing great proposals—quickly—is key to winning new business. With SharePoint Server 2007, we have everything available in one location, with built in workflow, and we have the organization, collaboration, and time-savings we need.”

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Josh Sebert, Chief Financial Officer, Gafcon

Legaspi recently finalized a proposal that required compiling information from 25 different consultants—Gafcon employees as well as outside vendors—from across the United States. “Without SharePoint Server 2007, it would have taken us two weeks longer to produce this proposal,” she says. By using Office SharePoint Server 2007, Gafcon can not only centralize and simplify access to proposals and supporting documentation, and provide tools that help track progress made, it can also make past proposals, with their supporting files and documentation, immediately available. “Because all of our documentation is in eGafcon, we can search for information from past proposals that we can repurpose for current proposals,” says Legaspi. Gafcon uses this historical data to inform, and thereby hasten, the creation of a new proposal and save time and resources in the process.

Higher Productivity, Higher Revenue

Jake Bastien, Director of Technical Services at SharePoint360 says, “Prior to SharePoint Server 2007, it required more development work to take advantage of business intelligence. Gafcon would have had to spend more on consulting services, and not only was it more costly, it was more time consuming. It could take several months to custom-develop the reporting features they needed.”

Now, Gafcon uses the built-in business intelligence capabilities of Office SharePoint Server 2007 to ensure that employees complete their timesheets on a daily basis. “We find that when people enter their hours every day, their reporting is more accurate,” says Sebert. “And not only are they reporting more accurately, which amounts to higher billable hours for Gafcon, we’ve also eliminated the time spent when five or six different employees used to have to chase people down to get them to fill in their timesheets.” Because employees are

entering timesheets on time, and more accurately, Gafcon is able to send out invoices to its clients, on average, up to two weeks earlier than before.

Sebert’s dashboards also report on individual employee productivity. “We can run reports on targets versus actuals on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis,” he says. “Now, we can easily see where the productivity holes are within the company. We’re a service-based business, and SharePoint Server 2007 helps us sell our people-hours more effectively.” Sebert says that between tracking billable hours more accurately, and the higher productivity that results when people can see the revenues they are supposed to achieve through billable hours worked, “we are capturing five to ten percent more revenue because SharePoint Server 2007 provides us with tools that help us really become much more effective managers of the business.”

Expanded Business Opportunities

With its nSpec system, Gafcon was able to enter the market of third-party insurance inspections and produce a profit-generating revenue stream worth U.S.\$2.8 million—in less than one year. “This expanded company revenues substantially” says Bumgardner. “We used SharePoint Server to deliver a new service quickly rather than spend lots of time in research and development. We were competitive from day one.” Bumgardner notes that this quick launch meant that Gafcon could capitalize on a finite building boom period. “Had it taken longer to develop this application, we would have missed the business opportunity entirely.”

Gaffen asserts that Office SharePoint Server 2007 differentiates Gafcon from the competition. “We have won more than one major assignment because we’ve been able to demonstrate the value we bring to our clients through collaboration and our use of business intelligence, in real time. In the

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construction industry, there is so much data and such a long lag time, sometimes several months, before it can be transformed into a usable format. But thanks to SharePoint Server 2007, we have valuable business information on hand, in dashboards, in real time. This advantage, beyond a doubt, helps us successfully compete against much bigger players.”

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