

Abacus uses innovative digital tools to streamline portfolio

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As client preferences change and the pandemic's future remains unknown, Wisconsin-based Abacus Architects is using innovative digital tools to streamline its portfolio.

The 23-person architecture firm works on around 100 projects per year nationwide across a range of markets, including multi-family, health care, senior living, corporate and industrial.

Eric Halbur, senior designer at Abacus, said there's been a lot of talk for more office spaces in residential housing as a result of the pandemic. In apartment complexes, he said there's been an uptick in requests for a two-bedroom for couples with the second bedroom being used as an office space.

"It's one of those hot topics right now where everyone is trying to jump on the situation and reinvent the wheel as far as how offices should be," Halbur said. "I think it's something that we have to try to understand, but I also feel that there's always trends in what happens in design and things always end up coming full circle."

He said it used to be people wanted an office, and then it went to wanting open workspaces, and now people are shifting back to private offices.

"It's all part of the lifecycle of design where things just kind of naturally change

back and forth over time as preferences change,” he said.

He added it’s too early for any major regulation changes surrounding designing spaces around pandemic reasons. He also was unsure if changes in preferences will be permanent or last until COVID-19 is mitigated.

“The big shift with architecture is to go with evidence-based design,” said Justin Marquis, project manager at Abacus. “With this being so quick and not really having that length to pull a lot of that data in terms of how buildings have impacted this, there’s not really that data to be able to pull from yet to create those designs.”

Halbur predicts the biggest change will be in assisted living. The neighborhood design in assisted living is already “leaps and bounds” ahead as far as safety and preventative measures, he said. He suspects a trend that leads down that path for that industry.

Abacus has offices in Sheboygan, Milwaukee, Manitowoc and Waterford. Staying on top of project management as a multi-office, multi-market company is what led Abacus to team up with Monograph over a year ago.

San Francisco-based Monograph is a firm management cloud-based software. It’s designed to help architects and engineers oversee projects, timesheets and forecasts in one, integrated and simple interface.

To date, Abacus has used Monograph on over 220 projects across all four offices and is able to have every employee utilize these tools for a more efficient workflow — regardless of where they may be working from.

Before Monograph, Halbur said the firm did a lot of manual and guesswork for project management. With the software, Abacus has a better idea of real-time progress and budget status, which has led to more data for the firm on what sectors or types of projects are more profitable.

Abacus had originally begun developing its own software. But when it found Monograph, it decided to go with it.

“It’s definitely something that’s going to be needed or wanted for the industry and for all parties in architecture and engineering ... I don’t see that going away,” Halbur said. He added that other software exists that does similar work, but is less visual and more data-focused.

“Being architects and everything else, we’re pretty visual people, and it’s simple to enter data in and simple to get data out. I definitely think that they’re filling a need in the industry for sure,” he said.

George Valdes, head of growth at Monograph, told WisBusiness.com that since mid-summer, the software company has seen a pickup in business. The pandemic had uncovered the challenges of managing projects on whiteboards and Excel files or having different project aspects fragmented across different software.

But not only does Monograph allow for streamlined project management, planning, time tracking and online invoice, but it also looks nice, Valdes said. It appeals to architects, who are visual people, in both design and user interface.

“If you can’t maintain that data in such a way that you can see real-time impact on what your budget looks like, then you’re just not really seeing your business as clearly as you need to to be able to make decisions quickly,” he said. “For

Monograph, if we can kind of help you think less about the project management side ... then that frees you up and your team to focus more on the billable work, meaning the work that's going to get to better design outcomes.”

Monograph caters to small architecture firms — from an individual up to a 75-person firm. Valdes explained that as firms get larger, the requirements from a software standpoint become more complex, which the company isn't ready for. However, Valdes noted 90 percent of the architecture industry is in that smaller size between a one- and 100-person firm.

“If that's the majority and people aren't giving them much love in terms of a great product, then we want to be the answer to that,” he said. “Monograph is just part of a modern movement of software that's just really going to help small businesses do more with less.”

Monograph is a small business itself made up of nine employees with plans to expand soon.

“They've been growing as we've been growing and actually using us to test some new things out and are really open to feedback just as we are, so have a really good synergy playing back and forth,” Marquis said. “I think it's only going to benefit the client on our end having that streamlined project management and keeping everything on track.”

Abacus had to shut down in mid-March, but was deemed essential and shortly opened back up. Employees have the option to work from home or in the office. The firm has been able to maintain a 95 percent client rate as it tackles a backlog of work that had been put on hold due to the pandemic.

“We haven’t had to lay anybody off and we’ve increased the size of the team. The next steps are going to be seeing what happens on the other side of this and see what happens with the industry and how things change,” Halbur said. “We’re going to do what we always do and that’s making sure we serve our clients and doing the best job we can to keep everyone here happy and healthy and safe.”

-By Stephanie Hoff

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