

O&M Manuals in the lean times. Skimp on them at your own risk!

A warning from a specialist O&M Manual Production Company of the dangers of underestimating the requirements of a good quality O&M Manual.

They are here to stay

Whatever your views about H&S Files / O&M Manuals, they're there for a reason. They aid in the safe operation, maintenance and replacement of materials and equipment. And, if they're compiled and used properly they can help save lives. For that reason they certainly aren't going to slacken off or go away so we all need to get used to working with them.

False economy - A symptom of the times.

It seems that the outsourcing of O&M Manuals is one of the first things to get axed as Main and Subcontractors attempt to be as competitive as possible. But, beware. This can prove to be a false economy.

Specialist O&M Manual producers, O&M I.T. Ltd (www.oandmit.co.uk) report a growing number of cases of clients coming to them with only a couple of weeks or, in some cases only days left before the manuals are due to be handed over. It's the same old story. Contractors think that by doing the manuals themselves they'll save money, but they underestimate the amount or complexity of the work involved and before they know it they're in trouble and either produce messy, unprofessional documents or have to go back to a 3rd party to complete half-finished manuals.

There is a good chance that by this time the client is already becoming annoyed with the way that the manuals are being done. 'Homemade' manuals will often be handed over late and the last memory the client has of the job is of badly organised manuals turning up weeks or months overdue which isn't good for the chances of repeat work with them.

It's not just the client who's affected. The building management / maintenance team can be left with frustratingly inadequate manuals that at best make their lives more difficult and at worst can endanger maintenance staff.

CDM Coordinators need to produce Health and Safety Files that work together with the manuals, but will they (the manuals) have the required information and can it be found easily. M&E Consultants face similar problems. Subcontractors get confused with complicated templates and different layouts and contents requirements for each job. They're late in submitting their individual manuals. The main contractor withholds funds pending manual completion.

In short, it's all rather nasty and messy, and it doesn't finish there. Specialist manual production companies realise that these late jobs are always going to be awkward and will disrupt their regular work, and they'll charge accordingly. Suddenly, the contractors' original idea of saving money backfires when they end up paying premium rates.

The solution

So, O&M Manuals are here to stay and are not likely to get easier. Therefore, if they have to be done, it makes sense to put in the effort to do them properly and leave a quality document on site that reflects well on your company.

The options available are:

1. Keep the manuals in house and on site. Typically the Site manager and / or secretary will do them, sometimes with help from others.
2. Keep them in house but centralised. Larger companies can employ staff dedicated to manual production.
3. Sub them out to a specialist company. In the same way that parts of the job are subbed out to companies that specialise in those areas, the manual production is entrusted to a 3rd party company.

The potential problems with the above are:

1. The site personnel are usually pretty overstretched, especially towards the end of a project (exactly the time when the manuals require the most input). Their time is split between the manuals and their mainstream work and either, or both can suffer. Also, it's rare that they will have the ability to produce both printed and electronic manuals to a high standard. Acceptable, maybe but nothing that's going to make the client think 'Now, that's impressive!'
2. Dedicated centrally based personnel can also produce good manuals but again, they rarely have the broad knowledge to excel at all aspects of the process. There's also the problem of them getting snowed under when a number of projects all finish close together and of being quiet at other times. Plus, they are an overhead.
3. Specialist companies cost money. Also, how do you know if they are going to produce the standard of manual that you'd like?

Choosing your best option

So, ask the following questions:

- a. How much does each option cost?
- b. Do they have the time, dedication and skills to produce a good quality manual that does the job and impresses the client? Ie, Can they find their way around advanced computer graphics, CD autorun packages? Have they the ability to accept very large files using an upload system or email?
Do they have a good working knowledge of construction terminology, and fully understand the requirements of H&S files and building log books or a third party database system?
Does their IT infrastructure include large file upload capability to avoid mailbox size limit problems?
Do they have an ftp site for quick issue of draft manuals?
Is there a detailed project progress report / audit trail available online for client and client reps to consult?
Does the electronic manual have a talk-through guide for ease of use?
- c. And the all important decider: - Does point b justify point a?

Conclusion

It's hard to argue that in-house manual production can match up to the service provided by a good dedicated specialist manual producer in the same way that a knowledgeable site manager is unlikely to do as good a plastering job as a specialist plasterer who does nothing else.

So, as with so many things, it boils down to an issue of cost versus gain.

Think ahead to the repercussions of your choice at this stage. The manuals can effect client relations, the safe operation and maintenance of the building, the subcontractors, design team, CDMC and others.

So, if you decide to go in-house, make sure that the personnel entrusted with the manual production have adequate knowledge, time and resources to do the job. It's simply unfair and unsafe to expect them to do too much without these things.

If they lack any of the above, be prepared to have to pass the manuals out to someone else later in the project to sort out or to issue low quality manuals to your client.

If you use a specialist manual producer then choose a good one. A quick search on Google for 'O&M Manuals' will bring up a number of companies who make a living out of doing this kind of work.

- Go for one that specialises in Manual production, not an offshoot of a larger company
- Make sure that they can answer yes to most or all the points mentioned in b. in the 'choosing the best option' section above
- Remember that every job and client has different manual requirements. Avoid companies who try to stick rigidly to one particular manual format. Go for one that adapts or customises manuals to meet client requirements.
- Quiz them on their information gathering methods. Too many simply issue a template and sit back and wait. Choose one that has a proactive approach of chasing information rather than waiting for it to land in their laps.
- Check their existing clients. Large respected contractors are unlikely to hang around for long with companies who can't produce the goods. Ask for references.
- Get them to quote on a specific or example job. They should be able to give you a rough idea of costs either on their website or over the phone.
- Beware of signing up to a proprietary system that seems like a good deal until such time as you're over-reliant upon them, at which time their prices start increasing. These systems are fine but it can be useful to ensure that you have your own backup that can be put onto your own system.

If you go with a specialist, give them as much notice as possible. This will ensure a quality manual is issued to a happy client with minimal expenditure. When you find one that you get on with they'll get to know how you work and vice versa. This kind of relationship leads to quality manuals, happy clients and the minimum of trouble and cost.

Good luck.