

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

A warning from a specialised O&M Manual production company of the dangers of underestimating the requirements of a good quality O&M Manual.

Whatever your views about H&S Files / O&M Manuals, they're there for a reason, they have to be done and, if they're compiled and used properly they can help save lives. They certainly aren't going to go away so 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.

Outsourcing versus In House

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 report a growing number of cases of main contractors 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.

This is bad news for a number of reasons:

- 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 are sometimes handed over late and the last memory the client has of the job is of scruffy O&M Manuals turning up weeks or months overdue which isn't good for the chances of repeat work with them.
- If you have to hand the manuals over to a specialist manual production company, they realise that these late jobs are always going to be awkward and will disrupt their regular work, so will charge accordingly.
- Clients are increasingly postponing sign off of a job because the O&M Manuals are not up to scratch.
- The completed manuals reflect on the Main contractors, regardless of who produced them.
- The building management / maintenance team have 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?

In short, it's all rather nasty and messy.

The solutions

The options available are:

1. Keep the manuals in house and on site but make sure they're done properly.
2. Keep them in house but allocate main office personnel to do them.
3. Sub them out to a specialist 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.
2. Dedicated centrally based personnel can also produce good manuals but 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.
3. Specialist companies cost money. Also, how do you know if they are going to produce the standard of manual that you'd like?

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

Choosing your best option

So, whoever you choose, ask the following questions:

- a) How much do they cost?
- b) Do they have the time, knowledge and skills to produce a good quality manual that does the job and impresses the client? I.e:
 - Can they find their way around computer graphics, CD autorun packages?
 - 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 for client and client reps to consult?
- c) Does point b justify point a?

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 you use a specialist manual compiler then choose a good one.

- A quick search on Google for 'O&M Manuals' or similar 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. above
- Remember that every job 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.
- Check their existing clients. Large respected companies are unlikely to hang around for long with companies who can't produce the goods.
- Figure in the costs.

Good Luck!

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 other than plastering.

Weight up the pros and cons of cost versus quality and think ahead to the repercussions of your choice at this stage. The manuals can effect safe operation and maintenance and relations with clients, subcontractors, design team, the CDMC and others.

If you keep the manuals in-house, give the people doing them the time, resources and backup to do them properly.

Good luck.