

Finding your priority

Why commissioning is more important than signing the contract

By Scott Offermann

In today's world we believe in instant gratification. We want what we want and we want it now. This attitude is everywhere, and in every business. In many cases, instant delivery is achievable and businesses are built around this expectation. Fast food. Same-day delivery. In by 10, and out by 5.

But construction should never be in this category. Unfortunately, many of our customers do not share this view. Oftentimes, the customers will demand accelerated scheduled to meet their deadlines, and objectives with no regard for the issues and problems created. They repeatedly ask for compressed work schedules, shortcuts to reduce construction time, occupation before construction is completed and the elimination of commissioning.

Unfortunately, in almost all of these situations, the final product is deficient in some manner. In more and more instances, the deficiencies are being addressed through litigation, costing contractors more than profits. Whether it's requested at the same cost or if the customer provides financial incentive, contractors should never sacrifice the final product in order to achieve unrealistic delivery timelines of the customers.

When planning a project, identifying the tasks and the order for each project is the first step. Identifying, defining and allowing the required time and resource to complete each step also is part of the fundamental requirements. Soil compaction, the curing of concrete, necessary inspections, and the setting and drying of finishes require a specific amount of time.

Depending on the products and location, there also can be manpower constraints, weather impacts and the necessary commissioning of equipment. Compressing time frame to a point work does not occur places the project in danger of having significant failure issues in the future, leading to occupant health and safety issues.

Ultimately, these avoidable issues can cost contractors and sub-contractors significant time and money, as well as damaging reputations. Today, more and more of these issues end in litigation, with the bulk of the burden falling on the contractor.

In most instances, the item that's the most critical to the continuing operation of any facility is deleted or at best abbreviated. This is the full commissioning the project. Whether constructing a complex mission critical space or a simple tenant improvement, the testing of the systems prior to required use is essential.

During the commission process, items identified typically are simple to repair and address. After the building is occupied, these same simple issues become a major task. The interruption of busi-

ness operation because air conditioning systems must be turned off for several hours, power disruptions, breaker testing or something as simple as flushing the building with fresh air becomes a major crisis for the new occupants.

It also places stress and inconveniences on the sub-contractors and contractors extended staff. It is during these times of high stress and occupant complaints that contractor are placed in a defensive position. Without the proper documentation and preparations, the customer takes little or no responsibility for the situation that they were pivotal in creating.

The process of commissioning is something that must be a requirement rather than a suggestion. It is only with the complete commission that the contractor definitively can state that the building is complete and operating as designed. It is during the commissioning period design that equipment and operational issues are identified. This allows the ability to address these issues in a proactive manner as opposed to reactive.

Many times, building management systems have programming errors that create heating or cooling issues, and operational deficiencies that are identified and are not the result of construction. After the building becomes occupied, all issues become contractor problems rather than the responsibility of the engineering and design team who created the deficiencies to begin with.

In many instances, these design teams divest themselves from the issue shifting the blame to the installation or operations team leaving the contractor left to take responsibility for addressing these issues.

When customers request the acceleration and omission of specific work, contractors must take a firm stand, and what can and cannot be accomplished. There is a point that, as professionals, delivery requests cannot be met. It is imperative that when customers attempt to force the acceleration of projects and the deletion of the commissioning process, contractor's document the risk associated with these decisions and have customers accept the liability of these actions.

This is not simply a conversation during a meeting, but written communication with not only the customer, but also the design teams. This will assist in protecting the contractor and sub-contractors from unreasonable expectations and shift the liability to either the customers or the design team. This can include the limitations of equipment warranties as well as the setting of support guidelines.

Being prepared to take a firm stance on these necessary steps will protect contractors against damaged reputation and financial loss. **CCR**

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