

# ACHIEVING shared goals



*The construction industry is a complex beast that combines owners, designers, builders and sub-contractors in order to realize a vision. With all these separate entities working on a project, there can be major conflicts in the process, resulting in missed deadlines and cost overruns. There has, however, been a recent shift in ideology in the industry to a more "collaborative construction" approach.*

**Written by Mark Golombek**

It is a relatively new idea within the industry, but one that Vancouver based Unitech Construction Management has been embracing ever since its inception in 1988. President Rick Boates and Director of Finance Brad Stevenson spoke about the logic of collaboration.

In the construction industry, the traditional general contractor fixed price arrangement brings with it an inherent conflict. With awarding to the lowest bidder being standard procedure, the odds are not always in favour of things running smoothly. Rick,





through his experience working as an owner's representative on the design side of the industry, saw an opportunity to create a service based company made up of construction professionals whose purpose throughout the entire construction process is to mitigate clients' risk, maximize clients' value and exceed clients' expectations. Since standard procedure was not ben-

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**"Unitech was founded to ensure that the owner received good value through the construction process."**

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efiting anyone, he believed that there had to be a way to work collaboratively with the owner to achieve these goals. Armed with this simple logic, he set out to offer an alternative to the industry and Unitech was launched.

Collaborative construction is what he terms the company's niche within the industry. "It's where we focus on the delivery of services to our clients – working collaboratively in the pure construction management role where we are a fee-for-service company." Unitech acts as the owner's agent in terms of implementing construction projects; for the duration of the project, »



- Unitech becomes an employee of the owner, providing an appealing level of transparency and accountability. "We like to describe it to our clients as if we were the door at the end of their hallway labelled Construction Division, and only when they need us for a construction project do they need to open the door and ask for our help."

The system lessens risk for the owners. "The major difference with the way we work is that we are part of the owner's team from the very beginning." Unitech works with the owner and design team from the conceptual stage to understand and adapt the client's goals and priorities while providing constructability advice so that risks for the owner are minimized before going into the construction phase. The owner is given a fixed fee for this work, and from there, the owner's team, the design team and the construction team work in collaboration to achieve the best results for the owner.

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### **"The company's system lessens risk for the owners."**

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They liken the process to a three legged stool. "If the three legs are all pointing in the same direction you have a pretty stable platform to build that project." Generally at the point in the construction process when a general contractor would bid for the project, Unitech has already been working with the owner for four to eight months optimizing the design to meet the owner's goals and reduce the owner's risk.

The construction team during that time will give their opinion on constructability of the design, on different options to reduce cost, and different ways of building and designing the project in order to mitigate the risk for the owner going forward. It is the time to understand each team's concerns and identify the risks, discuss the budget and determine what money should be allocated to address the concerns.

"Often the owners have a mental picture of the project and an idea as to how much they want to spend. The job of the team, early on, is to agree on a budget before someone promises too much. We want to discuss the risks right off the top and, if one of these is a mismatch between anticipated project costs and the anticipated project quality, the sooner that is on the table, the better and the less time will be wasted." In the traditional general contractor process, there can be a lot of re-work and wasted time that is alleviated through the collaborative process.

The evolution of construction management can be seen

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through what is called Integrated Project Delivery (IPD). "IPD enshrines what we are talking about. It puts together one contract which is signed between the owner, design team and construction team and often will even include some of the larger sub-trades. At the inception of the project, you are all working on a collaborative basis with everyone's goals aligned." Providing quite the incentive for all involved, a clause in the contract stipulates that if a better way can be found to implement the project and savings can be realized then everyone shares in the benefits.

The company embraces a straightforward approach and has lost projects due to telling the clients what they needed to hear rather than what they wanted to hear. What makes a good project for the owner makes a good project for Unitech. In this way, its goals are aligned with those of the owners from start to finish.

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**"What makes a good project for the owner makes a good project for Unitech."**

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"We do not see ourselves as a construction company; we see ourselves as a professional service company that just happens to deliver construction management services. This goes back to the reasons for founding the company." One of the main reasons was to eliminate what is known as an information silo – a management system where tasks do not cooperate with related systems until completion. "In the non collaborative approach everybody has their own piece of the work and they don't show it to anyone else until they are done, then they throw it over the wall and say, 'ok, now you have a whack!'" Instead of the resulting risk transfer, the preventative measures of risk mitigation are far more conducive to a successful project.

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**"We see ourselves as a professional service that just happens to be in construction."**

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Unitech tenders on a sub-trade basis. The company provides its own superintendents and carpenters and labourers to work on the bits and pieces. It tenders the main trades, but does not ask them to carry the risk as the four to eight months of preparatory work and discussions mitigates that responsibility from the trades. If an issue does arise, a risk allowance set aside at the beginning of the project will come into play and Unitech will ►





► collaborate with the trades to come up with the optimum solution. In this way, the trades become a part of the collaborative process.

The main challenge for the company stems from the fact that it operates in a niche market and must help its clients "to understand how we do things differently and the benefits that they, and the entire project team, will receive from proceeding on a pure construction management basis versus general contractor bid." As it is a niche market, there are only a handful of other companies that operate in this fashion.

Unitech tries to help potential clients understand that many companies will provide construction management on a project if that is what is required on that day. "If their primary business is either general contracting CM, CM at Risk or Design Build, they cannot deliver construction management properly while wearing a half dozen hats depending on the project and the day."

All of this planning is for naught if one doesn't have the right people. The Unitech team is very careful about the people they hire; they look for core values as well as training and experi-



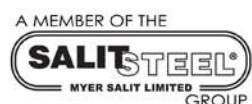
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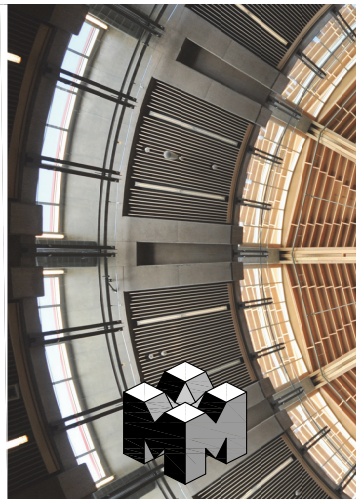
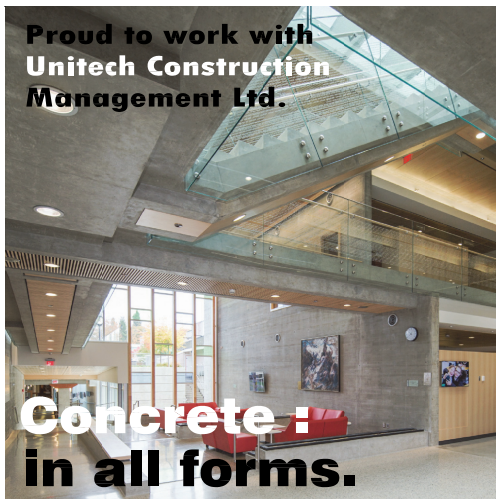


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ence. "When you look at our management team and superintendents, the majority started with us as apprentice carpenters or labourers and have grown with the company. It goes right back to hiring for the right core values. We need people that understand that we are partners with the owner and design team; that we are working in the same direction; that we are spending the owner's money with the same care as if we were spending our own."

To be sure, the company is committed to developing its work force. A high value is placed on training and a comprehensive program is in place. As this will be of mutual benefit to both the employee and Unitech, it advances the money to pay for training.

The company has been involved with Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) since its inception in the nineties. This rating system serves as an internationally recognized mark of excellence for green building practices and the company has built hundreds of millions of dollars worth of LEED certified facilities. It has made sense from a business perspective. "Do the clients want a LEED platinum plaque on the wall? What are their priorities? Is it part of the marketing program for ecologically minded clients, or is it an energy reduction goal for a school district that is trying to reduce their carbon footprint? We are simply looking to advise the owner on how we feel he can best achieve his end goal."

A recent triumph for the company and an excellent example of what it is capable would be the Abbotsford Senior Secondary School. This was a complicated building as it was adjacent to an existing 1,100 student high school, many parts of which were being demolished, and just across the playing field from a middle school with 650 students, both of which were in operation at the time. The project included a renovation component to a heritage gymnasium and a 650 seat performing arts ➤



- theatre and a new public library. There were five major deadlines to meet and all were met. The job was finished on the very day that had been scheduled for completion at the beginning of construction.

Not only was this \$50 million project done on time but it was accomplished significantly under budget. "Because we were working collaboratively with the owner and design team we were able to increase the high school library from 5,000 square feet to a full 15,000 square foot regional library. We did this without interrupting our schedule. Even though we finished significantly under budget, we were, along the way, able to make savings in the budget that permitted us to provide almost every item on the client's wish list!" With results like that, it is obvious why eighty-five percent of its business comes from repeat customers.

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**"Eighty-five percent of Unitech's business comes from repeat clients."**

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Unitech's experience includes over \$700 million worth of work in the pure construction management way – much of that from repeat clients and referrals – and the approach has allowed it to grow and expand. Blaine Graham heads up the new Winnipeg office and the intent is to grow into the Winnipeg market the same way the company grew in British Columbia. In the same way that Rick began the company years ago, the plan is to start slowly and grow carefully so as not to take on too much too soon.

Unitech celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary on September 18th with a big party in Vancouver. One hundred and fifty clients and consultants were welcomed in appreciation for the partnerships that have been built over the last quarter century. With its collaborative approach, Unitech has begun to turn a niche business into the preferred way of doing business. "Do a good job, have a little fun and make a little money has always been our motto and we have always focused on those three things, in that order," says Rick. "If you get the first two right, the third is going to follow and it has." ■

