Do You Know Where Your RFIs Are? How to Gain Control Now

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How many times have you submitted an RFI only to feel like it's gone MIA? It's probably a lot more common than any of us would care to admit. Having no semblance of control over the RFI once it's been sent on its way can surface all sorts of questions:

» Where is it in the process? Was it actually submitted? And was it sent to the right person/people?

» Who's responsible for the next step? Do they even know? Are they assembling the response yet? Are they actually replying back to the correct person?

» Is anything needed to complete a particular RFI?

» Is there a concern with providing answers or resolution? Were the correct details noted along with any documentation that could help keep the process moving without causing delays?

» What submitted RFIs are still outstanding?

This lack of visibility into the status of the RFI workflow is an unnecessary source of frustration. One common cause for the confusion is unintentional human error and oversight. Another is inefficient RFI management. In other words, people and process. That just means you have more control than you might realize.

There are a few ways to gain control over the RFI process that can give you a better chance of tracking its status:

Put Some RFI Best Practices in Order

As with most things in construction, timing is everything. Some responses require a bit of investigation, while more critical issues may need some time and effort to properly address. So, submitting and responding to RFIs as soon as possible gives them a fighting chance of being addressed appropriately and completely. The less adequate time there is to respond, the more chance for incurring delays.

Avoid the temptation to include more than one issue in an RFI. It may sound like an efficient strategy, but actually it'll create a bit of havoc. It's best to limit to one issue per submission, even if issues seem related. Different people may have to tackle each issue, which can then require a lot of coordination to get the RFI completed thoroughly and on time.

Have other avenues to find the answer been exhausted? RFIs cost money to complete. They also cost time (about nine days on average) and effort; submitting unnecessary ones can create an equally unnecessary logjam that holds up others from moving through. Valuable time can be saved if the answer is available and accessible either through existing documentation or a quick chat with the appropriate party.

Ensure no line item is left unaddressed. Skimping on details, or completely skipping over some, can create an otherwise avoidable back-and-forth clarification delay.

Always provide documentation. Anything from photos to change orders to emails to blueprints can give context to an RFI so there's little room for misinterpretation and misunderstanding.

Be clear about potential ramifications of nonaction. What costs could be incurred? Will the schedule be affected and by how much? Are there legal consequences if the RFI isn't addressed in time, if at all? Will any of these create even further implications for dependent tasks or decisions?

Use a Template That Includes the Kinds of Information Every RFI Will Need

A structured process requires structured details. That's where templates come in. They ensure the right details are being captured, which helps focus the request and the reply. Standardizing the required line items — which you can use as a master template to create customized RFIs — makes both the submittal and response workflows so much more efficient. The most common pieces of information to include are:

» Project name and location

» Subject of the RFI to help with proper routing

» Issue description with known details

» Any time-sensitivity and potential ramifications of nonaction

» Supporting evidence/documentation

» Submission date and requested date for reply

Turn Your RFI Submittal Process Into a Digital One With Construction Technology

Going digital will make the biggest difference in overcoming many of the frustrations with the RFI process. In particular, documentation software that manages process-based workflows provides the visibility into RFI status that contractors and other stakeholders have sought.

Here's how it can work: All communication, submissions, and responses are centralized in one platform, negating the common challenges of traditional disconnected processes involving email and paper forms that inadvertently get misplaced or deleted. Cloud-based systems in particular take it a step further. They provide more control over the RFI process itself, making it possible to submit, search for, access, review, and respond to RFIs through both web- and mobile-based apps. What's more, notifications can be set up to alert the appropriate party that they have an action item for an RFI, what they need to do and when it has to be done. Even all the supporting documentation can be linked to the submittal for all relevant parties to access; nothing gets lost in the process. The entire RFI process becomes faster, more efficient, and far less confusing.

Gaining insight into the RFI submittal workflow means less wondering where things stand. Along with adopting best practices and utilizing templates, adopting construction technology can give you control over the RFI process and confidence in tracking its status.

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