

**REMOVING DATA SILOS:
THE IMPACT ON CONSULTING
ENGINEERING COMPANIES**



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THE ISSUES
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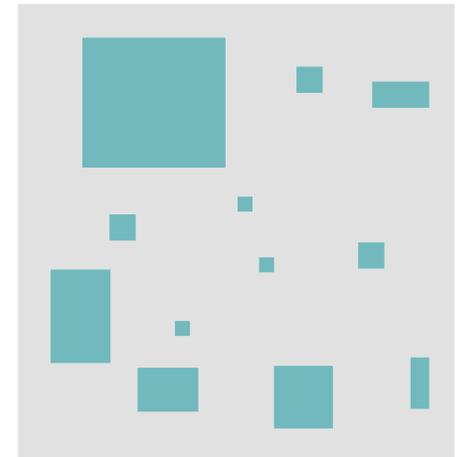
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THE SOLUTION
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“SILOS NEED TO WORK TOGETHER. BUT TOO OFTEN THAT DOESN’T HAPPEN. PROBLEMS ARISE WHEN DEPARTMENTS DO NOT SHARE THE SAME PRIORITIES, KNOWLEDGE, OR INFORMATION.”*

The ISSUES

COMPANIES PRESENT THEMSELVES to clients as reliable sources of expertise and exemplars of technical and professional competence. But it is very clear that there are still large numbers of companies with fragmented data, preventing them from giving their teams access to live information from one definitive version of information. This affects data on projects, clients, estimates, time, scheduling and so on. It seriously compromises their ability to deliver on client expectations.



The solution, clearly, is to pull all the information together. We have identified **five serious issues** for ‘unconnected’ companies to consider:

1. DATA IN SILOS. A recent Computerworld article says:

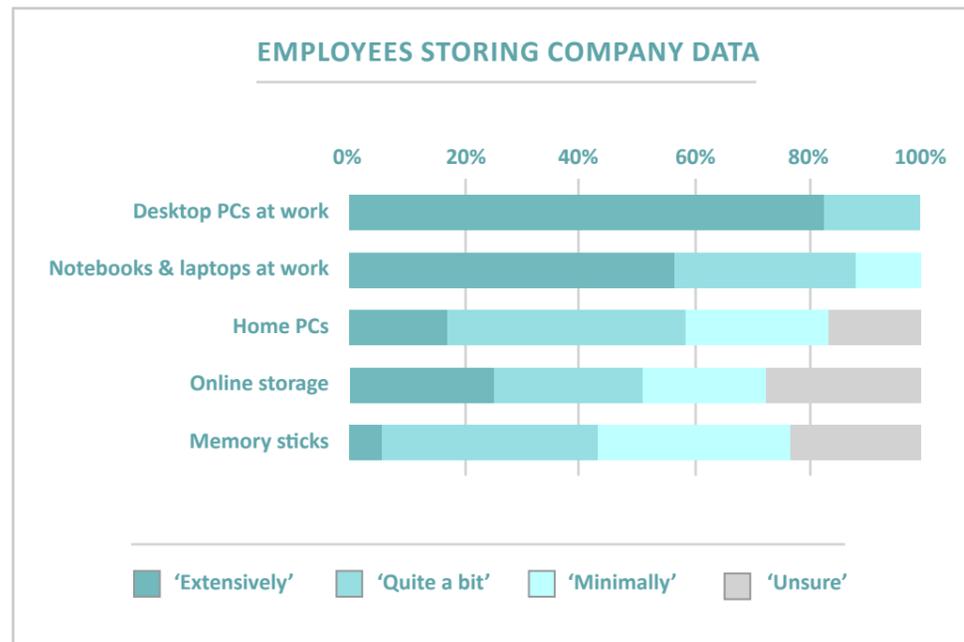
“Information silos are the scourge whose downfall has been foretold ever since the rise of enterprise resource planning in the 1990s, but today, their demise remains far from assured”.

People and teams use different tools, data sets and spreadsheets for different purposes without oversight:

“Duplication of data and efforts, data-quality issues and those dreaded silos prevent data and insights from being shared with other parts of the organization”. It results in “time wasted arguing about whose results are right, misguided decisions and higher cost. Most importantly, the organization cannot become truly data-driven in its decision-making, which is likely sooner or later to lead to competitive disadvantage”.

* How Excellent Companies Avoid Dumb Things by Neil Smith with Patricia O’Connell

2. FRAGMENTED DATA. Where is all your information? Computer Weekly published an article showing the level of fragmentation that companies have to deal with today. It revealed that well over **80%** of company data is stored on **local drives across the business:**



3. INCONSISTENT DATA. Data created by individuals is produced with the best of intentions – usually to glean new insights from it. But it is unstructured. Definitions and terms often differ from the main data set, and various assumptions, some of which may be wrong, will underlie the exercise. It makes it hugely difficult to validate or to safely share with others or reintroduce it to the main data set.

4. OUT OF DATE DATA. What starts out as a helpful attempt at intelligence-building becomes out of date within days or even hours and then remains frozen. Attempting to update it from time to time can be dangerous, as new errors can be introduced. Furthermore, it is hard to know who then used which version.

5. HARD-TO-GET-AT DATA WHEN IN A HURRY. The above *Computerworld* article noted that company data in multiple places is particularly vulnerable when needed quickly. *“People have to send an email or walk over and try to get the information from the person they believe has it.”* Worse, the user can then become more familiar with their off-line process than with the main data set, resulting in them trusting it more than they should, grabbing stale or erroneous information when in a hurry. It should also be noted that when people are in a hurry they are usually about to make a decision.

The SOLUTION

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER. The very phrase implies that people with information might be tempted to guard it carefully and only give any away when strictly necessary. It has been said that this mentality was one of the biggest problems of UK industry decades ago, reinforced by strict hierarchies and paper-bound offices. Today, restricting knowledge to a select few is obviously seen as archaic.

But how much progress has actually been made since then? An article in *Forbes* suggested that:

*“There are a few key factors in creating a thriving and productive team: **Knowledge, Collaboration, Creativity and Confidence.** Without these four basic factors any team is destined to fail. To encourage your teams to exhibit all 4 of these traits it is recommended that management allows and fosters cross-departmental interaction. The exchange of knowledge and the collaboration that will inevitably take place between teams is absolutely priceless.”*

1. KNOWLEDGE

You recruit people and nurture them to ensure they have the expertise to perform the task the customer requires. But do they have the knowledge to perform as well **for your business?**

- How is the project progressing vs the plan? Progression? budget use?
- What’s holding a project up or allowing it to progresses quicker than planned?
- How have similar projects performed previously, and what can be learned from them?
- Who have you sourced related expertise and equipment from previously?

- Have you discussed other related work with a different division of this organisation or from another of your offices?
- Have you agreed certain rates with an organisation?

Ensuring your team has instant access to all this information enables them to make timely, effective decisions, improve the performance of their projects and deliver from the perspective of your entire business.

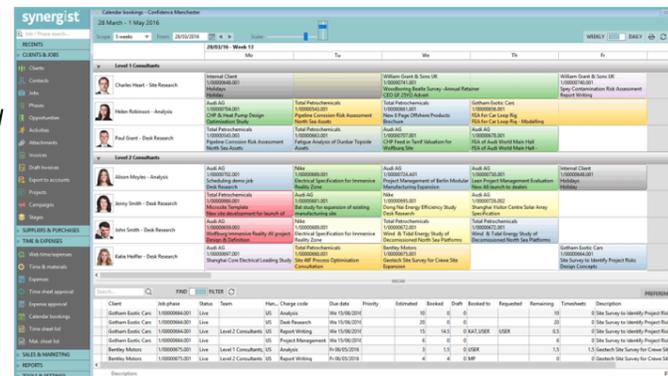
How does it work?

- Dashboard summary of projects identify areas requiring attention.
- Instant drill-down to the finer details to investigate any issue that's identified.
- Instant access to any project-related communications or documents for both current and historical work.

2. COLLABORATION

Having a centralised store of all project information, accessible simultaneously by all the team, delivers:

- A live view of all projects in a format familiar to all users.
- Live visibility of both current and planned resource availability.
- A single store of all project information including communications, documents, time and financials.



This instant access to information allows you to work more effectively as a team, being able to better share resources across projects as well as ensuring it's far easier to cover for staff even in the event of change of project manager etc. Having easy access to historical projects also allows lessons to be learnt regarding actual costs of delivering particular types of projects.

How does it work?

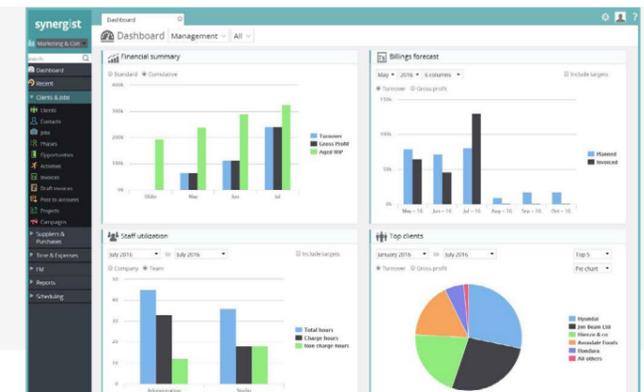
- Standard familiar format for all financial information related to a project.
- All project documents and emails can be attached for instant access by any user with sufficient access rights.
- Browser-based access ensures being out of the office is no barrier to having secure access to this wealth of shared information.

3. CREATIVITY

Your clients value you for your expertise and problem solving skills, but what do you do to encourage your team to utilise their creative problem-solving to continually improve the efficiency of your business? Sharing reliable, accurate information with your team encourages everyone to consider how they could work more effectively. This encourages a culture of shared responsibility for the profitability of the business and can deliver dramatic unexpected gains and a more motivated team.

How does it work?

- Dashboards give visibility of the performance trends of individual projects as well as the entire business.
- Targets can be set allowing clear measurability against a defined level giving clear business performance information.



4. CONFIDENCE

Having a reliable source of information that you trust is key to making confident decisions. **These are just a few examples of how this can improve your business:**

- At the point of billing, having a completely trusted list of costs incurred encourages inclusion of all chargeable elements, safe in the knowledge that you have the evidence to back this up.
- If clients query an invoice or a project's progress, for example, the person receiving the query will have the confidence in the data to address it immediately, ensuring a great customer experience.
- Taking big strategic business decisions that significantly affect the future of your business is fraught with risk if they are not based on reliable data. Synergist's powerful reporting tools make this critical data easily accessible, allowing decisions to be taken with confidence.

How does it work?

- Making it easy to enter costs, whether in the office or on the road, ensures Synergist displays the most up-to-date and comprehensive view of a project's costs every time it's accessed.
- By presenting comprehensive information in a standard manner, users know they only have to look at Synergist to make a confident informed decision.

“BUSINESS FRAGMENTATION OCCURS WHEN CRITICAL PROCESSES AREN’T MANAGED AS AN INTEGRATED SYSTEM. FRAGMENTED BUSINESS PROCESSES DESTROY VALUE.”*

* BPM Institute

The IMPACT

IN GILLIAN TETT’S BESTSELLING BUSINESS BOOK *The Silo Effect* the author argues that people often act foolishly, even dangerously, when imprisoned in silos in the workplace.

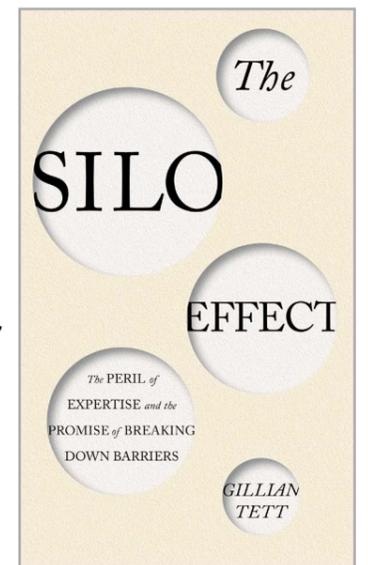
Tett’s conclusion is that silos are created with ease because businesses are obsessed with creating functional departments. This can hinder companies, cause normally clever people to act collectively in stupid ways, and sometimes cause a business to fail.

Even small businesses have self-enclosed departments that find it difficult to communicate with others. Each has a different focus, priorities, even vocabulary. A common example is the accounting / finance team ‘versus’ the rest of the business. Yet if they understood each other’s objectives and challenges better they could make decisions that would benefit the company enormously.

So when a business system such as Synergist comes along, giving members of every team immediate visibility of information, each individual sees the implications of their decisions far more clearly. Boundaries and misunderstandings between departments can melt away. Many of our clients tell us that this is a game-changer.

THE IMPACT

Examples of the effect are shown on the following pages.



1. WORKING TOGETHER

Steven Hunt, the founder of Steven A Hunt & Associates, a building services consultancy, told us:

“Our key motivations for getting the system included helping the team to see how it all works and fits together. They feel more ownership with their projects now. They can see that what they input affects the output.”

The benefits of bridging the departments also applies at the management level. Andy Yates, Director of Webb Yates Engineers told us:

“Everything’s in one place now. All the consulting information and all the financial data is combined together. It’s great to have everything organised now. It helps us to stay on top of things. Projects, clients, time, financials.”

2. SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

Complete visibility is a major driver for acquiring a system. Tim Knowles, Finance & Commercial Director of EDP (The Environmental Dimension Partnership Ltd) told us:

“Perhaps the single biggest benefit of all is the instant way we now get the overview of all the projects summarised together at any one time, showing values and work in progress.”

Steve Hunt said:

“It’s all joined up now. It was fragmented before, and it took a long time to gather and compare and process that information. It’s all in one place now, in front of you.”

Alexandros Iakovidis, Managing Director of economics consultancy Europe Economics, said:

“It’s...how we manage our consultancy. Many skill sets, complex strands of data, projects, clients, time, deadlines – all are pulled together into one system where everything is controlled in real time.”

3. IDENTIFYING SPECIFIC BENEFITS

Every business will have particular additional benefits from an all-linked-together system. Tim Knowles, Finance & Commercial Director of environmental planning consultancy EDP has multiple offices to contend with.

“We have three offices and they are all linked together in the one system. We manage the projects from here, accessing all the remote resources that the offices create. Everything is pulled into one.”

Whereas Andy Yates of Webb Yates made particular mention of how lack of fragmentation helps client enquiries and invoicing:

“When a client challenges an invoice we now don’t have to wade through a thousand emails to find the one that has a bearing on it. Everything’s in one place.”

And their fee proposals particularly benefited:

“One particular benefit is that we can create fee proposals on one screen. That wasn’t possible in our previous system. It’s another example of pulling everything together.”

Rebecca Frain, Managing Director of Electrical Safety UK told us:

“Billing was often late. When part of a project was completed it took time and effort to pull together all the costs and times and check for accuracy. There was very often a delay of two or three weeks before the invoice was sent out, which of course hurt cash flow.”

4. THE CONTEXT OF ALTERNATIVE SYSTEMS

Steve Laird, Group Finance Director of the 250-strong On Line Group (including On Line Design & Engineering) told us how they see Synergist in the landscape of comparable available systems:

“If Synergist was hypothetically taken away from us, we’d have to go with a fully-fledged ERP system. That would cost us a lot more, and bring various headaches including complexity of implementation and a lack of flexibility and a disconnection from our accounts system. Believe me, I would never look at another system.”

Synergist is a UK company producing information systems for the consultancy and agency sectors, helping firms manage their companies, projects, clients, time and profitability. For this paper we pooled the experiences of businesses using Synergist plus that of our implementation and development teams and industry research data.

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