

Ditch the paper to find the data



David Strickland is the Divisional Director for Finance at Walls Construction. We asked him about his digital transformation journey so far – and the resultant benefits across the business.

David, we understand that Walls has been a RedSky user for more than two decades?

Yes, I joined Walls more than 20 years ago and we were using RedSky even then.

Have you looked elsewhere?

I was part of the implementation team back in 2005, when we were looking to upgrade our software. We went to market and looked at all the various products that were out there. We came to the conclusion that RedSky was best suited to our business.

Why was RedSky the right choice for Walls?

Because the RedSky system is fully integrated, with modules ranging from estimating, procurement and finance right through to site requisitions. Basically, they had an entire system from A to Z.

Many other software companies just had a third-party estimating package. The trouble is, you can never get different products to integrate seamlessly – and more often than not, you end up having to key things in multiple times.

RedSky has a good track record with us. What we like about the system is that it's fully integrated and we can share information across Walls. We also value the fact that RedSky is continually investing in the product, to keep improving it.



How many quantity surveyors do you have at Walls? And what's your monthly volume of subcontractor payment certificates (certs)?

We have more than 30 quantity surveyors. Every month they value their subcontractors' work and write a certificate for each to confirm how much of the job they have completed. Between them, they issue around 400 to 500 certs in an average month. And based on those certificates, the payment follows.

That's a huge task. Could you talk us through the old, paper-based process that you were using, please?

The surveyors used to write out a paper cert for each subcontractor. It was in triplicate, with carbon copies – I'm sure that if you showed it to Generation Y, they wouldn't know what it was! They completed the certificate on site or in the office... wherever they were at the time.

And that piece of paper had to have multiple signatures?

Yes, up to four approvals were needed before the document came to us in Accounts. We then keyed it into the RedSky system. We had one person processing all the payment certs – some were weekly (like the labour-based subcontractors) and some were monthly (like the bigger subcontractors).

And the keying task was at times less than straightforward?

Sometimes the carbon copy that we were keying from was very difficult to decipher. In this day and age, people do less and less physical writing, so the standard of handwriting is deteriorating. The handwriting of some people is unbelievable. You cannot read it. Sometimes even trying to read a subcontractor's name is like trying to decipher a doctor's prescription. It's impossible.

Were there numerical mistakes on the certs too?

Yes. They used a spreadsheet to control their certs. Sometimes they would transpose the last figures from the last cert, or there would be a mistake in the addition, or they would cut and paste figures incorrectly, something like that. We had a lot of these issues going on with paper certs and the figures wouldn't then balance when they were entered into our system.

That must have made it difficult to make payments on time...

The biggest issue we had was that we would be asked to make a payment on the Friday, but the cert wouldn't have actually gone through the approval process yet. It was still on its way to us, which wasn't good.

So Friday was historically your payment run day and everyone tried to get everything teed up and ready?

Yes. There was a whole layer of preventative maintenance happening before then – some of the surveyors, for example, would check out the progress of the paperwork on a Wednesday, to clear any blockages and make sure everything was on track. Effectively they were 'mollycoddling' payments because they knew about the potential downsides if the payments didn't go through in time.

If a cert was missing on a Friday, how did you remedy the situation?

I ended up going halfway round the building on a Friday morning, trying to find out where the cert was. It was a case of following the entire trail. I knew it was in the building, but who was sitting on it? Who's not in the office? Why isn't the cert in with the Accounts team? I'd try and push it through the system, to make sure we paid on time. I'd be checking every half an hour to see if a person had got back to the office. It was a very inefficient way of doing things.

In the downturn a few years back, that must have caused problems.

Yes. It was very important that we paid people on time – and that we were seen to be doing that. So when it got to Friday and we hadn't even received the paperwork, it was very frustrating.

Did you ever miss payments because of these problems?

Yes, of course. Once we've processed the payment, run it through revenue and physically paid it, the subcontractor gets a remittance, so he knows the money's on its way to his bank account. If he doesn't get that remittance on the Friday, he knows he hasn't been paid. He's a really good subcontractor but he's irate. He'll start threatening to pull

off site. He has people to pay; he has a whole supply chain below him.

And then you've got all the needless phone calls...

Exactly. The subcontractor phones the surveyor asking why he hasn't been paid. And then because he knows one of the directors, he tries to escalate it. It's all about communication.

You became aware that other RedSky customers were using digitisation and workflow successfully in their business – how did you find that out?

By going to the User Group conference and talking with other system users. One said to me: 'Why aren't you using it? It's working flawlessly for us.' So I decided to find out more about digitising certs.

What was your next move?

People are busy. It's hard to get them to invest time to buy in to something different. So I actually brought our Divisional Director for Surveying over to a User Group meeting. I introduced him to the system user I'd met previously and when she told him about how she had digitised her processes, she had him hook, line and sinker. It's all about finding the most effective way to influence people.

And then you talked to RedSky...

Yes. RedSky explained the functionality and gave us a demonstration of the subcontractor certifications and approvals module. We asked questions and we decided that it would work for us. We then ran a pilot.

How did you select the best surveyor and project for your pilot?

You definitely need to 'sell' the new system to your audience. In our case, we picked a relatively young, very positive, IT-literate surveyor who had come to us from a competitor that already had digitised certs up and running. So we knew he was the man for the job. We chose Arkle Road, a project that was just starting, so it was a slow-burner. Success will come through building momentum gradually.

How did the pilot work?

The surveyor was enthusiastic. We put a workflow in place that mimicked our paper trail. We knew we wanted to get buy-in from the senior managers who would be doing the approvals, so we were careful not to break the mould. We had four signatures on the original paper cert, so we made sure we had four on the digital version too. The system is very flexible, so we were able to tweak it as we went along.



How did the pilot go?

We did have a few teething problems, as you'd expect, but they were easily overcome. You just have to work through them.

People are your biggest problem. When they come across a little fence, they'll say it's a mountain. You just need to break it down. More often than not, it was caused by a breakdown in understanding: "When I said this, I meant x not y." That sort of thing.

Steve Bell, a RedSky Consultant, came in and helped us change it to how we wanted it to appear. We were learning on the fly. We certainly didn't have everything documented perfectly.

Talking of documenting, what about your user manuals?

I wrote the user manuals, which are very picture-based, with lots of screenshots. It only took a matter of hours to write them, to be honest.

Do you have any tips for others considering implementing this module?

We were communicating regularly with the surveyor base, informing them of how the pilot was progressing and asking their advice on how best to overcome problems as they arose. This was important. I knew the way to succeed was through honesty and openness. They gave us feedback and we listened to what they had to say. By the time we went live, all the surveyors had been trained in the basics.

When did you go live?

We rolled out the subcontractor certification and approvals module across the entire company on 23 July 2019. It wasn't an overnight 'flick of a switch'; we used it for every new job from that moment on. We actually implemented it retrospectively on some jobs that had been running for quite a while and had 12 months still to run – we saw no point in operating a dual system.

What improvements have you noticed in terms of speed and accuracy?

The whole process is much quicker and simpler. The surveyor keys the information onto RedSky. If he has 20 subcontractors on a job, he needs to complete 20 certs and it's much quicker to key them in rather than writing them out manually.

Handwriting errors on the certs no longer occur, because it's all done digitally – the surveyor keys the information directly into the RedSky Valuation module instead of writing it on paper.

It then goes through an electronic approvals process before ending up in Accounts. And we're not having to key any corrections in because there are no errors.

What about improvements on the approvals side of things?

It's all digital, instantaneous and transparent, with complete visibility in terms of where the certs are and where any blockages are. If someone is off sick or on leave, we can allocate the approval task to somebody of an equivalent rank – a proxy user.

Sometimes there are still urgent payments that need to be made. A person might get an email asking them to approve something in their inbox, but they don't do it. In the past, we had surveyors trying to circumvent the system by faxing the cert across and then sending the original to us in the post, with only one half of it signed. We don't have any of those issues now. The beauty of RedSky is that you can do it all from home or from the office.

The new system has got rid of the frustrations and bottlenecks associated with paper in a process that involves multiple approvals. It has streamlined the whole process. It's certainly saving us a lot of time and hassle and is 100 times better than the way we used to do things.

Are you still running training sessions for the surveyors?

In all, we ran five or six training sessions in the early months, showing how to use the system and answering their questions. When more queries arise, we now do refresher sessions, with 10 guys in the room, all learning from each other and encouraging each other.

What do your surveyors think of the new approach?

They definitely give it the thumbs up. In the current climate, surveyors are a scarce resource, so anything that can increase their efficiency is a big plus to the company. I was talking to the surveyor who helped pilot the new approach and his reaction was: "You know, we should have done this years ago. It's so much easier, it's unreal."

Do you think this system will help you attract new surveyors to Walls?

100% yes. Here in Ireland, usually the salary and the package on offer to surveyors are about the same, whichever contractor they work with.

Digitising subcontractor certs and approvals has given us a competitive advantage: it's a slick, efficient, modern system that will appeal to the next generation of young surveyors.

Have you been able to put a figure on what you're saving, thanks to RedSky?

It's virtually impossible to come up with a figure. The only thing I can say to you is that, based on discussions with Finance colleagues in organisations similar to Walls, we have a small Accounts team, with just six people. And the reason why we don't need more people is because we have efficient processes. Digitising them through RedSky plays a major part in that achievement, of course.

So you've got your subcontractor certs and approvals sorted out – what's your next step on your digital transformation journey?

We've recently implemented the Invoice Register. It's great. We used to keep all our invoices in folders, within filing cabinets. It's been great to have had a big clear-out. We have emptied our archives and are now storing everything related to invoices electronically, on the system.

We've configured the workflow to suit how we operate. The invoices come into a generic accounts email inbox. We quickly vet them and pop them into the Invoice Register, which marks the start of the approval process. There's no physical scan involved.



What benefits are you getting from the Invoice Register?

We love it. It's a real time-saver. For example, if there's a query from site about an invoice, I don't have to go and hunt for the paperwork in a filing cabinet because on my screen I can see an image of the invoice document associated with the transaction.

It also enhances our roles, because we're not doing timewasting activities like photocopying, filing and shredding. There's no misfiling going on and there's far less paper in the office all round. People like to be productive.

Remittances are much easier, because they go out automatically, confirming the payment date and amount. And the auditors like our new, digital approach because everything they need can be accessed easily on the system – it's all transparent. It certainly takes a lot of the pressure off.

The RedSky system is huge – are you using other parts of it?

We use RedSky for Payroll – it's great, having all the costings integrated.

We rely on RedSky for managing our own internal plant too, so that we know what's in use and what's currently available – things like tower cranes and site huts, which we charge out to jobs at internal plant rates.

And we use RedSky for external plant, such as a teleporter. Our Procurement team loads the information onto RedSky and the system then automatically flags up when we're approaching the point where we need to off-hire it.

You've been hosted for a couple of years now – talk us through the process.

We did a dry run – we had a list of things that we wanted to test, so we logged into the cloud to check that they were all working correctly, which they were. Having proved that it would work when we went live, we set a date with RedSky for the data conversion.

It was quite straightforward really and it all happened over a bank holiday weekend. RedSky moved all our data from our server into the cloud. It was seamless. We came back in on the Tuesday morning and it was all done.

Was there any difference in performance?

The system was little bit slower, but that turned out to be because we didn't have enough Broadband width in the office. We simply upped the size of our 'pipe to the cloud' and that resolved the issue... not that it was much of an issue, really.

Was disaster planning one of your reasons for being hosted by RedSky?

Our office is in the flight path for Dublin Airport, so we were worried that a plane might at some point clip the building. Because of that, disaster recovery was in the back of our minds when made the decision to be hosted by RedSky. But nobody saw the coronavirus pandemic coming.

You were one of the first construction companies to offer home-working in response to the pandemic...

When news of the pandemic came to light, the senior management team at Walls was very proactive and put the health and safety of staff above everything else. They recognised that the best way to reduce our office staff's risk of exposure to the virus would be for them to work from home. And because we had recently digitised our subcontractor certificates, our invoice process and our workflows, we knew this would be possible.

How long did the transition to home-working take?

The decision was made on the Wednesday. The following morning, people quite literally picked up their work pc, put it in their car and took it home. By lunchtime the building was deserted. By Friday, everyone was nicely set up at home, with a secure connection to RedSky in the cloud and access to all the digitised systems they had been using in the office.

It couldn't have been easier. In the current climate, it's a brilliant, flexible solution that has enabled us to protect our core processes, our data and our people. It means a lot to the

staff, too – they really appreciate the opportunity to stay away from the office and keep safe.

What would you say to anyone thinking about being hosted by RedSky?

If you're not hosted, you should seriously consider it. Because if disaster strikes, your data and your systems are all safe in the cloud. We can't take the credit for seeing the coronavirus health emergency coming, but because we were hosted, we were able to walk away and work from our homes.

Do you find it useful to have your own RedSky Account Manager?

Yes, although Chris is no longer our Account Manager, he was in charge of the Irish area. He's very customer-focused and we would meet up regularly for a chat. He would always listen to my feedback and take it back to RedSky for actioning.

What tips would you offer to people reading this today who are considering either moving to the RedSky system or implementing more modules on their existing RedSky system?

There's nothing it can't do. Although that's probably a blessing and a curse, because if you don't configure the system correctly, you won't get what you want from it. For example, we made a bit of a mistake with our Asset Register – we went too deep. We were logging absolutely everything, even keyboards. In hindsight, I can see that this was a crazy approach and there really was no need for that level of detail. We learned from that experience.

So my advice is to think very carefully about what you want from the system before configuring it.

Anything else that you'd like to add?

No, I don't think so. The RedSky system is an excellent product and a comprehensive, cost-effective solution for Walls.



About Walls Construction

The company was established more than 60 years ago and is one of Ireland's largest building contractors.

Walls is privately owned and has a strong track record in multiple sectors, from commercial, industrial, residential, healthcare and education through to retail, conservation and tourism/leisure.

The company employs around 300 full-time staff and around 85% of its business is subcontracted out.

About RedSky

RedSky software enables construction companies to achieve and maintain competitive advantage. We make real-time actions visible, enabling you to control change, eliminate risk and achieve ongoing incremental gains from improved operational efficiency. Across all types of construction and contracting projects our software is scalable, modular and proven to improve performance and productivity.

