COMPANY PROFILE

EasyBuild's ERP software provides construction companies with a more intuitive, logical approach to running their IT, says new CEO Carol Massay

Built for construction, by construction

WILL MANN

In the competitive construction software marketplace, EasyBuild has an advantage: its product was developed inside a construction firm.

The ERP (enterprise resource planning) software was originally developed by EasyBuild founder Patrick McGowan who was formerly the Group Financial Controller and IT Manager at Durkan Group.

Mr McGowan, now EasyBuild's chief technology officer says: "EasyBuild benefits from having been built for construction by construction."

EasyBuild has successfully grown as a business – while retaining close links with Durkan – selling its software to a wide range of clients, including housebuilders and contractors.

Inside knowledge

This connection with the industry, and understanding of what drives construction companies, is what has made EasyBuild so successful, says new CEO Carol Massay, who has over 30 years' experience working within the construction industry.

"EasyBuild is an end-to-end solution, a suite of application software that addresses all the operational needs of a modern construction business – finance, commercial, project management, compliance," she explains.

"It's also flexible and easy to integrate; the underlying platform is Oracle and it uses the Microsoft .NET framework, which means it can talk to any other system.

"From my industry experience, I've seen many construction companies have a piecemeal approach to IT development," she says. "They will typically have made one big investment decision, and then added a few bolt-ons over time, and ended up with a mish-mash of Excel and other systems, which don't talk to each other very well. We often get companies coming to us after a bad IT experience on a contract."
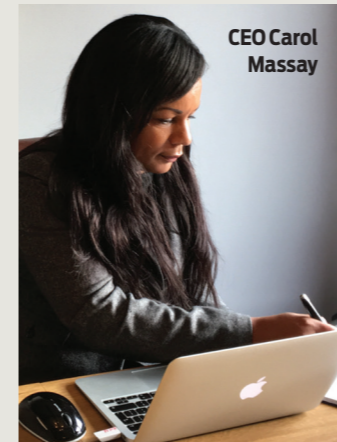
EasyBuild is intended as a full ERP solution, though Ms Massay says new customers can start with just the accounting modules and build from there (see box of key features).

Selling point

She points to the software's CVR (cost-value reconciliation) handling as one of its biggest selling points. Cost value reconciliation is fundamental to accurate accounting and statutory compliance within an industry that works on very tight margins.

"The original development of the software was driven by a collaboration between commercial managers and the financial function to share information across all projects at Durkan," Ms Massay says.

"Subcontractors are the biggest cost on a project. EasyBuild tells you in real-time what your subcontractor costs and liabilities have been during each monthly reporting period. The CVR process allows the commercial manager to check every subcontractor for variations, and any additional works required.

"The development of EasyBuild allows QSs access to this daily, but it's also for senior management. They can control authorisation of payments and run monthly reports across all contracts for CVR."

Flexibility is a watchword for EasyBuild. "We adapt to our customer's needs and circumstances," Ms Massay says. "For example, some companies use SharePoint for workflow processes and document management, and other estimating package. If they've made large investments, we will work proactively to integrate Easybuild into existing core systems. We are all about making their IT processes as slick as possible."

Customer service

EasyBuild prides itself on taking feedback from our customers and adapting its products accordingly.

"We've recently introduced a KPI rating system for subcontractors," Ms Massay explains. "You can use the software to bring up a subbie's portfolio, and rate their performance on key parameters such as health and safety, finish on time and on budget. It helps contractors with PQQs and supply chain management."

"The future software roadmap includes a brand new release of our works order module with mobiles apps, health and safety management systems based on site, linking back to head office systems, coming out later in 2016. "For companies who provide repairs and maintenance, the module logs jobs as they are received, track their status on site, and provide a full database of engineers with skills and location," Ms Massay says. "It will integrate into the core EasyBuild system so there will be no need for re-keying of information."

EasyBuild also works with other business partners to improve its service offering. It has recently agreed a tie-up with document scanner provider Plustek (see box), and Ms Massay says she is talking to BIM software providers, with a view to forming a partnership. "Interoperability is obviously key – we would want any partner company to use up-to-date software that can work with anything else – that's why we're using Oracle/Microsoft," she says.

"Construction has always been perceived as an IT dinosaur. As long as contractors make money, they are sometimes reluctant to make changes. But the reality is that contractors could be making more profit by improving checks and controls with a modern integrated finance system. And that's what happens with companies who move across to EasyBuild."

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EASYBUILD LINKS UP WITH PLUSTEK

Capturing documentation as part of the construction process – particularly at site offices – has always been a challenge for contractors. This is why EasyBuild has partnered with scanner manufacturer Plustek to offer what it says is a simple-to-deploy, standalone scanning solution – the eScan A150.

The firm says the network-based scanner, which is wifi- and ethernet-enabled, requires no PC and integrates easily with EasyBuild's accounting and project management software. With a seven-inch colour touch screen, Plustek's eScan A150 scanner can process 15 documents per minute, and has a suggested daily capacity of 1,500 pages.

Plustek's UK sales director Shooping Lin says: "It's as simple as using a fax and ideal for construction site offices."

CEO Carol Massay

Founder Patrick McGowan

> "EasyBuild tells you what your subcontractor costs have been during each monthly reporting period"

CAROL MASSAY, EASYBUILD

KEY FEATURES AND BENEFITS

- EasyBuild uses Oracle as its underlying platform and the Microsoft Windows .NET framework to give it the flexibility to work with any other software system.
- Modular structure means companies can pick modules which best suit their needs, with tailored packages available for specialists.
- User-friendly and easy-to-learn, a result of the software being developed in-house at Durkan.
- Cost-value reconciliation (CVR) provides real-time snapshots of how well contracts are performing in a dashboard-style environment.
- Drill-down capability allows management to move from high level information to detailed aspects of contracts quickly and logically.
- Efficient data storage in one central repository, eliminating departmental islands of information, and meaning that data is only keyed in once.
- Reporting functionality contains over 800 pre-defined reports, using the industry standard Crystal Reports, while allowing ad hoc and customisable reporting.
- Database capability helps with supplier management, providing performance and compliance details.

CASE STUDY: DURKAN GROUP

EasyBuild was developed in-house at London-based contractor and housebuilder Durkan Group, and the company has used it ever since, in various development phases.

As procurement director Brian Willams says, the beauty of EasyBuild is that "the end user developed it".

"It is logical and easy for new starters to pick up," he says. "Every surveyor that has joined from another business cannot praise it enough."

Mr Williams heads up the commercial side of Durkan, and says a key feature of the software is that it "brings together the accounting and surveying functions" of the business.

"There is a high degree of transparency, so that every cost allocated by accounts can be interrogated by the surveyor," he explains. "That could be a simple materials invoice, which the surveyor can track all the way back to the invoice, and understand why the cost has been allocated."

Mr Williams says Durkan makes use of EasyBuild's database capability to help manage its supply chain. "We can search for a particular subcontractor, what jobs they are working on, and how they are performing in terms of KPIs," he says.

"The software will send us an automatic alert if a supplier hasn't, for example, renewed its insurance certificates.

"We can also put in controls to ensure payments for a particular package of works don't go out until we have received the order."

CASE STUDY: CJ O'SHEA

Concrete frame contractor CJ O'Shea has been using EasyBuild since 2008.

Financial director Jim McMillan says ease-of-use and compatibility were the key reasons why O'Shea picked the software.

"In the past, systems we've tried haven't done everything they promised – they've been over-complicated with too much functionality," Mr McMillan explains. "EasyBuild is very straightforward. Additionally, it was important that we could drop information into Excel because it's a package our team are used to working with, and EasyBuild allows us to do this very easily."

The implementation of EasyBuild at O'Shea was done rapidly. "All the information we required from our old system was brought across as EasyBuild promised it would be, and the software ran side-by-side with the existing system for three weeks," Mr McMillan says.

The O'Shea management is pleased with the level of detailed interrogation possible with EasyBuild's reporting functionality.

"We can run reports by types of contract, by date range, and examine any aspect of a job in close detail," Mr McMillan says. "EasyBuild allows you to drill down through different levels of information very easily. If you suspect there's an issue with materials, you are able to scrutinise all the costs right down to a 5p screw.

"It means that if you have a job where there is an overspend, you can narrow down the problem area quickly."

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