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Specification Justification

Four years after its release, some architects and AV pros are still reluctant to use the new MasterFormat. Are they compromising projects by not adopting it?

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AS WE APPROACH THE END OF 2008, WE'RE ALSO ABOUT to pass the four-year anniversary of MasterFormat 2004 (MF04), the Construction Specifications Institute's organizational standard for construction requirements. MF04 increased from 16 to 50 the divisions of construction data—which includes AV—that architects, builders, and contractors organize their work around on construction projects. The changeover has been slow. While a slim majority of the projects we work on continue to use the older, 16-division format from 1995, we have seen a steady increase in the number of projects using MF04. During its first year on the market, many architects, who use a detailed, proprietary derivative called MasterSpec, sounded like they were being dragged into it kicking and screaming. Now's a good time to perform a quick assessment of how well MF04 and MasterSpec are doing their jobs.

A LITTLE BACKGROUND

The reasons CSI updated MasterFormat were fourfold. First, the 16 divisions needed expanding to accommodate rapid changes in a communications. This was driven primarily by the rate at which IT services had grown to incorporate telephony and data communications, their impact on construction, and their importance to how businesses operate.

The second reason was to provide a more flexible specification structure that could respond to future changes. Third, and more fundamentally, the changes were to ensure there was a mechanism that would deliver better designed, integrated, and built projects by improving coordination among the various design disciplines and construction trades.

Finally, the new format needed to incorporate such things as systems commissioning and building operations or building information modeling (BIM). MF04 should have had a noticeable impact on how AV pros design, bid, build, and operate projects. How well has it succeeded?

One of the first questions I ask an architect when I come onto a project is, "Will we use MF04?" The prevailing answer these days is a grumpy, "Yes." Some architects wonder openly about the necessity, partially because of cost, partially because of the day-to-day business of running projects and writing specifications. In short, it costs more to produce well-coordinated construction specifications based on the expansion from 16 to 50 divisions.

The change has resulted in a cottage industry of specification writers who coordinate this portion of the work for the architect. In some instances an owner understands and is willing to pay for this added complexity; in others, they are not. You could characterize the situation as an increase in the entropy of the design (and construction) process. The job of the spec writer is to reduce the entropy as much as possible. They're hampered, however, by a lack of familiarity with the AV industry and where it fits into the rest of the puzzle.

AV IS MULTI-DIVISIONAL

Although the AV part of a project now fits into Division 27-Communications of MasterFormat 2004, its tentacles reach into other areas of the specification. For instance, now that AV has been separated from Division 26-Electrical, there are more sections of that division with which to coordinate.

In the perfect MF04 world, there should also be more internal coordination within Division 27 due to the parsing of responsibilities between AV and the rest of the communications specialties. This parsing breaks out such items as equipment racks, power conditioning and distribution, and cable plant to other sections within the division. In effect, it breaks out these responsibilities to other contractors—firms that may not have any expertise in AV systems integration and are unfamiliar with the level of care necessary to do things like pull coaxial cable, which is different from pulling power or even data cable. And don't ask a data cable firm to do things like time video or terminate AV cable—dealing with soldering irons, coax strippers, and the like is not something they specialize in or want to learn.

Architects and their spec writers expect us to know where our AV systems fit into the overall specification, which is reasonable. So how do we deal with issues such as where to fit a CATV, IPTV, or MATV specification? Granted, the new format allows for a greater flexibility in such areas, but there is no nationally agreed upon location for this in the MF04 layout. It is an issue that was raised during InfoComm at the ICAT Committee meeting as something that needs resolution.

One of the promises of the new format was to clearly describe areas of responsibility for various contractors. The hope has been that this would place the work under the most appropriate contractor, instead of leaving the electrical contractor responsible for all systems. Granted, it could result in more subcontractors on a project and thereby greater costs to the owner. Unfortunately, it could also delegate responsibility for provision and installation of AV systems to a contractor who is unprepared to handle the work. In practice, the electrical contractor still typically retains responsibility for the AV systems contractors, so things haven't changed much there.

How do we as AV consultants deal with all this? In general, I think we're grateful to have a place to hang our hats. After that, we tend to be pretty rebellious. We typically keep all our specifications in Division 27 40 00-Audio-Video Communications and Division 27 50 00-Distributed Communications and Monitoring Systems. This includes things such as operations and maintenance of communications systems, common work results, schedules, commissioning of communications, and structured cabling—each a distinct piece under the Division 27-Communications umbrella. We're not comfortable parsing these into other headings where another contractor might end up involved. After all, we're dealing with *integrators*, not *differentiators*, and building owners expect a single point of contact.

What we would really like to see is a separate division for AV systems, to include things like sound systems, noise masking systems, emergency paging, CATV and IPTV systems, and quite a few others that I don't have room to list. MF04 provides a flexible standard through which to recommend changes and push for revisions, which is one beauty of the revised format.

We as an industry must take advantage of that flexibility and push for the necessary changes. But it will require an integrated effort by AV consultants, contractors, integrators, and manufacturers to bring about such changes. In the end, though, entropy should be reduced and the goal of providing a better documented and coordinated set of specifications will become a reality.

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