

Catching the Data Wave

BY ELIZABETH BRINK

“The front end of the building process is just a small part of its useful life,” says Gensler’s Tom Houlihan, a nationally known designer of information systems for real estate and facilities management. “You have to complete the circle by collecting facilities data in a way that unlocks its true strategic value.”

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Gensler Information Solutions, part of our consulting practice, has worked with clients like Toyota Motor Sales, USA, Inc. to help them realize the full strategic potential of their facilities data. In the late nineties, Toyota’s Real Estate and Facilities Group realized that its existing methods for tracking space and people were less than optimal. Toyota Motor Sales employs 5,000+ people at its Torrance campus near Los Angeles, and every week, as many as 200 of them will move. To update seating locations and phone/data connections, the Group made periodic walkthroughs of the 2.1 million square-foot space. Changes were noted manually by marking up floor plans, a process that resulted in unreliable (because untimely) data that was hard to use and analyze as part of higher-level strategic decision-making. The Group asked Gensler for help.

Corralling the Data

The challenge the Group faced was three-fold. First, they needed reliable, real-time data about internal moves—accurate, timely information on which strategic real estate decisions could be based. Second, they needed various types of other data about each occupant. Third, they needed the data in a “reporting” format that could be immediately used by decision-makers.

Many organizations experience this kind of situation, and its ubiquity led Gensler to develop 4-1-Where, a web-based facilities management tool. Think of 4-1-Where as an online office-seating chart with “intelligence.” Not only will it tell you the basics—where people sit and what their phone numbers and data-port addresses are—but it gives you information about their business unit, where they are on the organization chart,

their history of moves, and how much space they occupy and what it costs. Since the data is linked, every new entry updates the whole system. Reports are always current.

In 2001, Toyota's Real Estate and Facilities Group made the decision to utilize a version of Gensler's 4-1-Where system tailored to their specific needs and existing processes. This new tool lets them monitor vacancies, develop move plans, and track internal rent costs in real-time. No more walkthroughs, no more marked-up floor plans. "What gives facilities information its strategic value is an organization's ability to aggregate and analyze it," says Gensler's Paul Natzke, a member of our Toyota team. "It's useful to know that ten people moved desks last Monday, but what drives strategy is knowing that the rate of moves in that business unit is up by 80 percent from a year ago."

How Micro Feeds Macro

Toyota's version of 4-1-Where gives their Relocation Team, IS/Telecom Group, and HR access to all occupancy data. Baseline information is built into the system so updates and changes can be made quickly and easily by using a web interface. The system links with Toyota's move/add/change process, so individual associates enter the data as they move. Real estate strategists can then use this real-time data to generate and analyze reports on the frequency of moves ("churn rate"), occupancy patterns, and the use of space. They use this kind of macro-level analysis to identify underutilized space across the campus, and benchmark each business unit's facilities use against specific performance metrics. Besides directly informing real estate strategy and tactics, the analysis can also be used to make business units aware of the real cost of their facilities so they can proactively align their use of space with Toyota's larger goals of efficiency and effectiveness. In the near future, Toyota's 4-1-Where tool will support the automatic charge-back of facilities cost to the business units, making their financial accountability for the use of space explicit.

What Makes Data Useful?

Bill Lim, a senior member of Gensler's Information Solutions team, notes the qualities of facilities data that make it useful to real estate strategists. "You have to be able to collect and manage the information so it's accurate and 'real-time' current, in a form in which it can be analyzed and shared easily by different decision-makers." For Toyota, this has been a clear effect of putting 4-1-Where to work. As Paul Natzke explains, "What we put in place at their Torrance campus can be thought

of as a grassroots approach to the facilities information problem." The data flows out of real events—people moving from one place to another—and the existing user-initiated process by which Toyota supports these moves. The tool itself integrates this and other data to create the reports that are so strategically valuable.

Not only did 4-1-Where dramatically improve the Real Estate and Facilities Group's ability to manage this huge campus, but it reinforced their value to other stakeholders, including the business units and other corporate groups, like HR and IT. "Because we're seen now as strategic thinkers, we've become a key participant in the company's core business decision-making," says Toyota Real Estate's Desirée Shier.

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