

STRUCTURE IN THE PROJECT

For more than ten years, think project! has been offering its customers support for the management of construction projects. An online project collaboration platform enabling structured project communications, think project! is characterised by its high flexibility, ease of configuration and open interfaces to other systems.

Where did the idea come from, how has use of online collaboration platforms developed in the last decade, and what could the future look like? Dirk Lutzeböck, Head of Research and Development and Jochen Maurer, Head of Product Management at think project! answer these questions.

Mr Lutzeböck, what did the construction industry look like ten years ago, and how did the online project collaboration platform think project! come about?

One of the biggest challenges facing the construction industry in the mid-nineties was data exchange. It wasn't possible to send plans digitally until data exchange formats existed in the CAD domain. This data was initially copied to and sent by CD, or later DVD, or distributed by email. However, mailing disks was complicated and time-consuming and email inboxes soon became full due to the high volumes of data needing to be exchanged. At the same time, the internet was gaining ground, so it made sense to develop ways to use it as a means of data transfer. This led to the idea of the online project collaboration platform think project!.

What is the difference between an online collaboration platform like think project! and an FTP server, for example, on which project data can also be stored?

The biggest difference is that, from the very start, think project! was designed to map communications within a project. FTP servers provide purely file-based storage on the internet, similar to that available for PC-based work. However, the disadvantage of these storage structures is that they become more and more difficult to manage and less transparent as the project increases in size – particularly when it comes to managing access rights. think project! therefore uses the 'communication principle'.

The basic underlying idea is that access rights are automatically based on communication, meaning those who are involved in the communication have access, no one else. As a result, there is no additional storage structure that defines that only a certain group of people may access certain information; instead, as soon as the author sends a document, its access rights are maintained automatically. This actually works in exactly the same way as the

sending of letters and emails. I send a message to someone – and who knows about this? Me as the sender, and the recipients.

This is the principle think project! is based on, and the resulting automation of access right leads to the centralised documentation that constitutes the project platform. In contrast to a letter or email, which can exist multiple times, documents in think project! exist only once at a central location, regardless of whether communication is between two or 20 people. This produces clear, standardised and central storage based on the communication process alone.

Mr Maurer, in your mind, which are the particular features that characterise think project!?

An important characteristic of think project! is the platform's enormous flexibility. This means that any processes playing a role in a specific project environment can be individually mapped. For example, in addition to plan and design management, tender documents or purchase orders and invoices can be mapped on think project!, and each of these processes is individually organised.

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Dirk Lutzeböck, Head of Research and Development, think project!



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Jochen Maurer, Head of Product Management, think project!

Thanks to its configuration options, think project! has a unique range of functions that enable flexible creation of project-, customer- and country-specific solutions without any programming. We sit down with our customers and discuss exactly what a process should look like. As a rule, the customer then has its individual processes mapped on the project platform within just a few days. think project! is therefore not simply a platform for managing data; it also offers a broad range of options, such as the display of individual, multi-level release processes, form-based communication such as RFIs (Requests for Information) and the automatic creation of reports.

How does think project! differ from other systems?

Unlike many (internal) document management systems, the focus in think project! is on the entire project organisation and thus the collaboration between different project partners, beyond a company's own IT infrastructure. Anything between two and 200 companies can work on a construction project. think project! offers all those involved a common working environment, a platform via which information and documents can be transferred between these participants. In addition, thanks to an SOAP interface, it is possible to integrate with internal company systems, if data from these sources needs to be exchanged with the online collaboration platform. For instance, address data can be accessed from an ERP system such as SAP. think project! offers several standard interfaces with, for example, AutoCAD, MS Outlook and MS SharePoint.

How has the construction industry changed in the last ten years?

The construction industry has changed enormously over the past decade, due to ever shorter construction periods and the increasingly international nature of projects. In my experience, planning coordination has become especially difficult, because projects are transferred to the execution phase more quickly. In addition, many more construction projects are now organised on an international level. A multinational project team collaborates across different locations and everyone has their own working

method and language. The internet is now a permanent fixture and is standard on practically every construction site. All this means that plans and documents need to be exchanged far more quickly than before, often around the globe. Thanks to the internet, this is now technologically possible. As a result, online project collaboration platforms such as think project! have become well-established in construction projects in many countries, because they can meet these higher requirements with ease.

However, the type of communication has also changed greatly in recent years. In the nineties, business communication was still mainly by letter and fax. Email only started to break through as a widely-used communication medium late in the decade. Ten years on, we also have social media such as Facebook or Twitter, particularly in the private sphere; but networks such as Xing and LinkedIn are also rapidly gaining ground for certain aspects of business communication.

Is this new type of communication the future, and will it affect how project platforms are used?

These social media are networks on which users jointly create their own content, leading to a type of group communication on a particular subject. It is therefore certainly possible for this communication to become established in the business sphere as well.

When I look at collaboration via a project platform, it is always based on a contractual relationship between companies. As a result, they must always hold and organise definitive, official documentation and provide audit trails of mandatory communication between contractual partners. However, I can certainly imagine that this new type of communication could someday be used for accomplishing special project tasks. In addition to email communication, this 'network communication' could also be integrated within think project!. However, because our principal objective relates to project documentation, it means we also have to document these communication processes in a structured way. In any way we take a keen interest in the changes taking place in the world we live and work in, and of course the way we communicate.