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M.J. Harris embraces technology to give itself the edge

Birmingham Business Journal - June 15, 2007 by Adam Stone Special

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As a rule, the general contracting world is not known for its avid embrace of technology. Michael Harris is out to reverse that trend.

As president of M.J. Harris Inc., a general contractor specializing in health care construction, he has worked for a dozen years to prove that technology can do good things for this industry.



"A large amount of our corporate funding is allocated toward IT every year," said Harris, who has an in-house team writing custom software as needed. "I am constantly looking for places to interject computing where traditionally it is not there."



Special to BBJ The Laredo Specialty Hospital in Texas is one of many medical properties that have helped M.J. Harris steadily increase revenue. View Larger

A typical example: Paying subcontractors. The subcontractor sends a bill, which makes it through the field office a month later. Headquarters manually keys it into the

accounting software and queues it for payment in another 30 days. It's manual and it's slow, he said.

Tailored software doesn't just make the steps flow more smoothly. It makes the process more efficient and more transparent for everyone involved. And that's just one small example.

Do this often enough, tackling enough sluggish processes, and you can make a major change in the way the game is played, Harris said.

"Ultimately it means I can go to an owner and say: I can put your hospital in place 20 percent faster than my competition," Harris said. That pitch has found a ready audience around Birmingham.

Harris projects have included construction of the new \$4.5 million Gardendale Civic Center and the new \$2 million Guesthouse Inn in Leeds near the Interstate 20 exit.

M.J. Harris also did an \$8 million job at Minor Elementary School in west Jefferson County and built a \$10 million hospital in Henderson, Nev., for HealthSouth Corp.

The key has been not just a willingness to use technology, but an understanding of technology as a tool, not just a toy.

Rather than asking - What does it do? - Harris wants to know: "How can we use it to our benefit?"

Adam Stone is a freelance writer based in Annapolis, Md.

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