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The business of ants: Examining the parallels between the ant world and the consulting world - by Paul LaCrosse

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Ants! A word guaranteed to make anyone cringe if uttered within the home. Yet, as I was scrambling to find the Windex to clean up the pheromone trail and thinking of how repugnant it was to have these critters in my kitchen, I also couldn't help but marvel at how they worked. Indeed, from a management perspective, ants are nearly perfect. A single scout can alert the entire colony, mobilize resources quickly, and communicate exactly where to find the cookie crumb that had rolled under the refrigerator. From there, each ant knows where to go, and what its role is for the colony. In less than a single night, my house went from a few disorganized scouts to an endless marching line of ants. It was while battling this latest invasion that the parallels between the ant world and the consulting world were illuminated and I realized that a recent successful project was simply our team emulating ants.

Earlier this year we were awarded a substantial project from one of our top clients. The job was to provide a facility assessment of the mechanical, electrical, plumbing, and fire protection systems for a massive hospital on the east coast. When I say "massive," I mean "three million square feet massive." We were all very excited for the win, and looking forward to the project, but there was a catch – the project needed to be completed, soup-to-nuts, within about three months. Even for a 400-person firm this schedule was extremely aggressive, and I had doubts that we would achieve this. It was even less encouraging when I plotted out the milestones on a calendar. Survey was to start in early April, we were to have a 50% draft by early May, and the 100% report was to be issued the first week in July.

Without thinking about it, we applied the qualities that make an ant colony successful to our project (with a little help from technology).

The process started with the scouts: The project manager and on-site personnel managers hunting through over 100 gigabytes of PDF drawings to locate equipment rooms and points of interest for our study. The same scouts visited the site ahead of the rest of the survey team to review what data (cookie crumbs) would be mined for the report.

The next step in the process was to alert the colony and communicate how to find the data that we needed to collect. Using Microsoft Teams, we were able to hold videoconferences across four of our offices (New York, Richmond, Washington DC, and Baltimore) to identify project requirements, team member roles, where to go, and when to be there. This allowed us to coordinate with an onsite survey team of six to seven people.

The third step was to mine the data and deliver it to the report writers. Using BIM360, the survey teams were able to collect data and photos in an organized manner and upload to our servers in real-time. This allowed parallel processing of the data while it was being collected, which allowed us to meet such an aggressive schedule.

Ultimately, the project team was able to deliver a 200+ page facility assessment with over 7,000 pages of field reports and supplemental appendices by the first week of July. While the technology

we employed allowed us to succeed, it would have been worthless without the hard work and dedication of the 20+ people on the team who sacrificed through long nights and weekends to make the project a success. The real key to a successful colony...Teamwork.

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