

Episode: 54

Mark Oden



Mike Merrill:

Hello, and welcome to the Mobile Workforce podcast, sponsored by About Time Technologies and WorkMax. I am your host, Mike Merrill. And today we are sitting down with Mark Oden, who is the CEO of BIM Designs, a minority owned, union signatory, preconstruction, detailing, and design building information and modeling company. So a lot of words there, but basically a BIM company. And what Mark does is they are experts in BIM modeling and also laser scanning coordination and preconstruction management, as well as other VDC solutions for the AEC industry. So Mark's company is nearly a fully remote workforce and has been in business since 2016, and has ranked at number 148 in the Inc. 5000 fastest-growing companies list. So he knows a thing or two about BIM and building and management of teams and their initiatives. Today we're going to talk about why construction companies need to embrace technology in order to scale their business, as well as also the other challenges that they run into as construction leaders and working on best practices as they try and grow their technology team. So, hello, Mark. Thanks for joining us today. Looking forward to the conversation.

Mark Oden:

Hello, Mike, thank you so much for having me. Appreciate you for giving us a platform.

Mike Merrill:

Absolutely. So let's start out and just talk about what exactly does embracing technology mean for a construction company?

Mark Oden:

Yeah, it's a great question. In the context of a construction company, the financial need to optimize drives the need to embrace technology. Construction companies have such low margins that we really need to be as efficient as we can be and we need to be

competitive and really defend the tight margins. In the context of the owner or the investor, they really can enforce the adoption of technology through the process that they want to respect and it can really, adopting technology through the entire life cycle can yield tremendous savings. For example, just in the BIM process alone, not all technology or construction technology, but just the BIM process alone has been proven to save upwards of 40% in the construction life cycle.

Mike Merrill:

That's a substantial savings. And it's interesting you draw that distinction between projects where a general contractor, or maybe somebody is the hired gun, so to speak, to come in and complete the project, and there's a bank involved. And then when you have a capital project where it's somebody else's money, and they're going to say, "No, this is how we're going to do this because this is the way I need my money to be tracked." Is that a fair assessment?

Mark Oden:

Yeah. Yeah. Owners definitely hire the subject matter experts, the general contractors, the architects, the construction management firms, owners representatives, to help them construct and they know how to do that. Absolutely. And the owner can with the background of understanding how technology can support the process, they can certainly influence those subject matter experts to adopt technology. Absolutely.

Mike Merrill:

So what kind of adoptions, or what kind of technologies are you talking about that that owners typically require?

Mark Oden:

One perfect example is BIM, is the building information modeling process, simply because it can save that 40%. So owners are becoming more and more common and educated on what BIM is and starting to request that of the architect and of the general contractor. Traditionally in the last 20 years or so BIM has been really from the subcontractor up supported, and now we're seeing a lot of support from the owner as they educate themselves on the BIM process.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah. That's a great example. What about cloud technology? Why is that such a key piece to an owner having that visibility?

Mark Oden:

Yeah, so the disparate workforces really is what it is. The contracting, it's called contracting, because you end up with a lot of different legal contracts. You end up with a lot of different companies. A lot of different companies are managing a lot of different contracts and they're doing that out of their own home offices or headquarters or remote offices, and cloud technology helps bring all of those entities together under one roof, even though they might be separate companies, separate physical locations. The cloud based portion of it really creates one cohesive team.

Mike Merrill:

And so what are some of the examples of solutions that are cloud hosted that the owners have visibility into?

Mark Oden:

There's several out there. So many, I would say. Procore would be one of the widely adopted ones, a project management solution, a cloud based one that has visibility for the subcontractor, the general contractor and the owner, and really helps navigate a lot of the processes related to change orders, requests for information, documentation. So that's just one of many, many examples.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah. We definitely value a relationship with Procore as a technology and integration partner for our business too. They're like you mentioned widely adopted within the industry. So what about when we talk about those types of solutions, does the owner pay or supplement the cost of some of these things at times, or is this something that the contractor is kind of on the hook to pay for?

Mark Oden:

It's a mixed bag. If it's discussed during the initial negotiations with the owner, then the owner often does pay for that. Sometimes these processes are decided halfway through the project, or sometimes the subcontractor says, "Well, we're going to do it for our firm, even if the entire project isn't performing it." So it really is dependent on the specific project who ultimately pays for that line item. To get the job done, you have to get your tools paid for one way or the other, whether the owner says, "Hey, I'm going to explicitly pay this," or it's an explicit change order, or it's built in the OH & P numbers. Either way, there's a need to, again, bring those tools into the company and educate the employees on how to use those tools and the team members.

Mike Merrill:

So 6, 8, 10 years ago, BIM was kind of a buzzword that we would hear a lot and I think now it's a lot more of a commonly used term and a technology that's widely adopted. I know that there was a smart market report that said about 50% of some of these larger projects are utilizing BIM and there's some trending where that's going to be substantially more in the future. What are your thoughts on that? And what can you tell us from your experience in that adoption?

Mark Oden:

Yeah, it's a great observation. I think it's the same smart market report is predicting. It'll go up to 90% for some of the interested parties of BIM adoption and projects within the next three years. So definitely see that BIM is a technology that has been around for about 20 years, but the traction is the hockey puck element of the traction is happening right now. We're living it today. And the transformation is around the

change management and the process management within each individual construction company and the entire team that works together.

Mike Merrill:

How important is it for young people coming into construction, or even for the companies looking to hire, that there's a mix of that knowledge of an understanding of both the software solutions and the technical, and then also the actual construction process? Is that something you're seeing any changes in today in the education system and some of these younger folks entering the construction workforce?

Mark Oden:

Yeah, completely Mike. Traditionally, it's either you knew construction and you were 20 years in the space for construction, or you knew technology and you 20 years in the space of technology and in today's world, universities, community colleges, and even unions are realizing the importance of merging construction and technology together, creating dual degrees or encouraging coursework that bridges the gap or the difference between the two of those industries. So I really see there is a skillset gap that requires one to cross train, and that gap exists today and has existed for the last number of years. And I do see that there's a lot of interested parties across the spectrum. Again, universities and unions included are wanting to help close that gap.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, so when we talk about BIM specifically, are there things with BIM that are important for some of these people entering the workforce have an understanding of as far as both sides of that, the technical and the actual practical side of it?

Mark Oden:

Sure, yeah. Building information modeling is as good as the person who's entering the data. It's 3D modeling, taking the architect's and the engineer's vision and then rendering that down to an eighth of an inch accuracy, at least on the construction, the subcontractor preconstruction side of the house. And you really need to have that construction experience

to develop and design in detail models to the level of constructability that's required on the the job site. It's probably a very underappreciated element because it is difficult to learn the technology. It's difficult to learn CAD. It's difficult to learn the intricate processes that are involved in operating that tool and in order to provide constructable deliverables, you need to also understand and appreciate how to construct and how to build. And so the best BIM processes are executed by those that understand construction and understand the technology together.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, that's a fair point. And I think, and that kind of straddles another topic that I think is interesting. Obviously, just circumstantially within the industry and even society, we've had to be a lot better at being a remote workforce and using those types of technology tools that can allow us to do that. So what are you seeing as far as moving forward into the future, even after things settle down with the pandemic or whatever else is going on there, do you think a lot of these things are going to continue forward as they have, as far as the remote workforce? Or do see things coming back to the way they used to be more?

Mark Oden:

Personally, I believe in the remote workforce. I believe in the hybrid workforce. The company, since I've had ownership of it has been a remote team since the company was started in 2016. I took ownership in 2018. I know that there's a need for physical in person meetings. There's need to construct and build, and there's a need to build a relationship with someone in person, but a tremendous amount of work and I believe a tremendous amount of economy is going to be operated remotely in the coming years. And we're seeing companies like Microsoft and Facebook now Meta really adopting the concept of the metaverse, of the idea that there is a mixed reality, that there is a virtual space that we will live in outside of our physical space that we live in and interact and operate in. So this is the beginning of that future. Absolutely.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, and you said something about kind of the setup of your company, your organization. It sounds like by

design, you were already doing remote collaboration and work before this was more of a necessity or a defensive approach. What have you learned about that and why do you think that's a better approach? Sounds like that's your plan moving forward also.

Mark Oden:

Yeah, so we've been talking a lot about the technology expert or the technology industry graduate, if you will, and then the construction industry graduate, if you will. I'm a graduate of the technology industry. So since mid-2000s, I've been working in the high tech space, and I've been working with remote teams and designing and building and working with amazing partners, amazing colleagues, managers, and a dedicated staff to build products like WebEx. I was a product manager on that product back in the mid-2000s, early to mid-2000s. So I was working worldwide with many disparate remote teams to develop a multi-billion dollar product and it was possible. And I learned the value and capability of doing that and the importance of communication and remote communication. And I brought that notion into this company, BIM Designs when I acquired it. I already saw Cisco and WebEx, they were operating, yes, they had physical offices and they worked remote with teams all around the world. So I knew what was possible and I didn't fear it and I pushed hard for the team to grow as a remote organization.

Mike Merrill:

That's awesome. Your background's a little unique in that you kind of come into construction through the technical side instead of the trades or the field it sounds like. What has, I know we didn't necessarily discuss this in our planning of this discussion today, but I'm curious what is surprising to you both pleasantly, and then also what's a struggle for you, coming from that other background and coming into this construction space?

Mark Oden:

Yeah, I love your curiosity, Mike, thank you for asking. I think in the technology space, there's a lot of room for growth in the sense of understanding the technical details. In terms of speaking of construction, there's a lot of growth in personal management

and people management. There's a lot of growth in communicating to each other and a lot of growth in saying, "How do I deal with a very tight timeline with very small, thin constraints and accomplish the goal at hand while coming out of it positive and maintaining relationships?" So managing the direct conversations that happen with individuals is much more common in the construction space than it is in the technology space. The timelines, the impacts, the feedback it's all very fast paced. And so I've been enjoying learning that element of the construction industry is how do we partner together? How do we manage together while working through high stress situations?

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, that's a great point. So speaking of that, if we're working remotely, we're managing our business in a different way, not so much for your organization, you were kind of geared that way, but a lot of companies are having to really adjust. How is culture being impacted internally with construction teams and working with clients and working with each other, management? Do you see any challenges there, or anything that's working really well that you want to point out or talk about?

Mark Oden:

Yeah, I really think that there's things that work very well and there's things that always need improvement. And that's whether you're entirely physical, whether you're entirely remote or you're mixed. I think business is an evolving organization. That's what I love about running this company and growing this company. And in leadership, I really believe in culture and an organization we've had within our company for the last few years is the culture committee. So we've enlisted employees within the company to ask for a certain amount of budget, ask to run certain events, have local events in person, have virtual events. So really bringing a lot of care to the company culture, whether it be remote or in person is critical and maybe even higher priority for a remote company. We have a praise channel where we acknowledge and express gratitude to each other, even virtually. Just this coming Monday, we're going to have a remote cooking event where we'll have a cooking contest. We'll show how we can cook a beautiful plate of food.

Our head of sales used to be a master chef. And so he loves bringing that element of his background into the company. And so he'll demonstrate how to cook that and then we'll ask employees to see if they can rinse and repeat and have a little photo contest there or cooking contest. Even though we can't taste contests, but we can all see the presentation.

Mike Merrill:

What it looks like.

Mark Oden:

Yeah, yeah. Two years ago, we actually flew everybody in and we did a in person holiday event. Last year, we did an entirely virtual event and it was still very heartwarming and it was very touching and we even had live music. And for many of us, it was the first time we had heard live music in a long time. I mean, more than a year. So it was really a very, very touching and wonderful event. And I'm looking forward to doing that again this year.

Mike Merrill:

I love hearing this. I think it's not super common. I mean, we've had guests on here, we have customers that we work with at my company that are in construction and they do things like this, but it is definitely unique. Is there a book or was there a course, or did you hear a motivational speaker or life coaches? I mean, who's helping foster these ideas and actually put them into action within your organization? Or are you guys just doing it on your own because you're cool?

Mark Oden:

Thanks for that. I do think it's a combination of many things. I paid very close attention when I was at Cisco of how they run their organization and how they grow and how they invest and train in their culture. The culture committee idea, I did learn from Cisco and I really embraced it and adopted it. In terms of leadership skills, leadership traits, and bringing care to the organization, we do have an executive coach. His name is Helda Helberg and he's really been tremendous to helping us build a leadership team and build leadership within the organization and lead a

care based organization. So it's been a career in the making really.

Mike Merrill:

No, I love that. You're tapping on the shoulder of mentors. You're bringing in experts, you're bringing experience from other industries or companies. It sounds like a fantastic, thriving, exciting place to work.

Mark Oden:

Thank you so much, Mike. I appreciate you for seeing that.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, that's awesome. So what about companies that don't have that going right now? Are there some recommendations that you could share on how they could get started or what a good first step might be to move in that direction?

Mark Oden:

Into the direction of adopting construction technology?

Mike Merrill:

Yeah. As well as maintaining this type of a culture, or a collaborative, personal culture while they're doing it.

Mark Oden:

Oh, okay, great, great. Yeah. For us, we, how do I say we cut the cord? So we just went with it and we learned as we went. So I think I truly believe in continuous improvement. So at the leadership level, at the executive level, there must be buy-in to the decision obviously, and then continuous improvement along the way. There's change management processes that can be executed to say, "Okay, what would this look like?" But you can never perfectly plan it, whether it be changing systems from Slack to Teams or Teams to Slack, or vice versa. There should be planning and forethought put into it, but you just have to believe in continuous improvement and agree and understand that at some point you'll have to cut the cord to plug in a new one. That's what I would say, is believe in the process.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, that's great advice as well. What are some of the challenges that you've had in trying to make some of these changes and adjustments? Have you found resistance or has it gone swimmingly?

Mark Oden:

I think for the most part, employees really love the remote work environment and we believe in helping employees live the life that they want to live. So we believe in helping them navigate work times and home times and self care. We have self care photo contests. We have self care recommendations. We talk about self care every week. So it's important to balance your home work life, and we really encourage that from the company's perspective, we encourage that balance. Our executives, sometimes they work until midnight or 2:00 AM to make sure that we're going to submit a bid and get the job in and we are all dedicated to our staff and we're all dedicated to making sure that we're successful. And we're dedicated to making sure that we're giving ourselves the subsequent equal time for self care, making sure we get enough sleep at night, making sure we exercise during the weekends and eat right, is something that we actually take very, very seriously at our company and at our leadership team so that we can make sure that we are always bringing our best selves to our employees and to our clients.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, I love that. I was going to ask you what your definition of self care was, but you just laid it out really nicely there. So thanks for that.

Mark Oden:

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you.

Mike Merrill:

Another topic that we've discuss on this podcast with a few guests, what about the mental health side of things? Are there challenges that you run into there and are you finding a way to address those, especially as we're dealing with more of a remote workforce? Maybe it's harder to see the signs and hints that there's issues that somebody might be experiencing.

Mark Oden:

Yeah. We definitely encourage a open door policy and in creating a language around speaking to if someone is feeling overwhelmed or someone is feeling stressed out. We, in speaking to needs, we really encourage that language and we don't shut it down. So we really sit down, if that's brought up, we sit down with the employee, we understand, pardon, we understand where they may be feeling overwhelmed and how we can support them. When there's challenges at home, we give them the space to manage those challenges at home. While we all have to be responsible to our duties at work, we need to be responsible and be good leaders at home as well. And so we really work very closely with each of our employees to balance that.

I'll also add a note that we started about nine months ago, both internally and an external publication of a wellness journal. So it's a simple one page article that we look for relevant material for the subject matter that we choose and we distill that into something that's very digestible and we hand that out both internally and externally. It's something that we've really enjoyed creating and I've enjoyed being a part of. I'm so proud of the team for self creating that idea and publishing it. It's something we do for the community. It's not something we get paid for or anything, but we found it very relevant in today's time.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, I love that. So you're doing a lot. So kudos to you. It's impressive and inspiring to hear all of the different things that you're doing to balance and to take advantage of those resources and tools that you've been able to collectively bring together to create this company in place to not only build stuff, but it sounds like a great place for your employees and your team to work within.

Mark Oden:

Thank you, Mike. Yeah, on the topic of self care and helping everybody live the life they want to live, it's a lesson I had to learn the hard way. I had to learn how to take care of myself, especially as we scaled from three employees to almost 70 in the last three years, and placing it on the Inc. 5000 list at number 148 was not necessarily a goal, but it was a major understanding of the amount of work that was needed

to get there. And I'm very, very proud of the team for what they've accomplished.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, so speaking of that, how are you recruiting new talent and sharing this message like, hey, this is a great place to work? We're doing some really powerful things. We have a lot of good life balance things going on here. What are you doing as an approach to recruit new talent and grow?

Mark Oden:

Yeah, thank you so much. We have the traditional channels, like Indeed and LinkedIn, that we market on. I really think what goes the farthest, what goes the absolute furthest is my team has organically, the recruiting team, both on the non-technical side and the technical side, have organically told me that they discuss the company's core values and the company's culture during the recruiting process. And when they're asked, potential employees are pretty open in asking, "How do you like working at this company?" And it's the heartfelt, honest, true answer that our employees give back that effectively seals the deal. And that's nothing that's been rehearsed or discussed about and I'm always pleased and floored, honestly, when I hear these stories and why people chose to join the company, it's usually because of those conversations during the recruiting process.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, that's awesome. And I've got to imagine that in an environment like that, where people are excited and fulfilled to be a part of this team, it would be really easy to recommend a friend or a colleague or people that they knew from other parts of their life to come and join in.

Mark Oden:

Yeah, my head of project controls, Ashley, was just telling me that as she has one-on-ones with employees around the company, she's just pleasantly surprised and optimistic of the fact that they all want to see the collective success of the company. They're asking what can they do better to reach higher grounds for the company, not for themselves, but for the entire

organization. So I think it's part of the culture that we've built is how do we continue to succeed as an entire collaboration, as an entire organization so that we can individually succeed.

Mike Merrill:

That's great. So you mentioned something there, I'm curious, you said one on ones. Is that something that's scheduled? Regular? Is it random? How do you approach that?

Mark Oden:

Yeah, we just started, I think three months ago. We looked at the entire organization, the entire company and the leadership team, and we said, "Okay, let's have everybody have at least one on one with every single employee once a quarter."

Mike Merrill:

Wow.

Mark Oden:

So that was something that we instituted last last quarter and has been actively very positive. I did a summer road show where I drove around the country because our employees are all around the country. So I visited employees, clients, and unions all around the country and had dinner, lunches, I invited spouses as well. So I really got to know each individual employee and their family to the level of extent that we all opened up to be.

Mike Merrill:

Wow. That is fascinating. And I won't say that nobody else is doing that, but I certainly don't hear of that a whole lot within a construction team. So that's very, very cool.

Mark Oden:

Thanks. Thank you, Mike.

Mike Merrill:

So when there's challenges, when you have a bottleneck or something to overcome, how does your team solve that and collaborate remotely to get to resolution?

Mark Oden:

Yeah, the biggest one for us is identify needs. So we have to first identify the stakeholders, who's a part of this bottleneck, who's a part of this decision, and then what are the needs of each individual to move past that bottleneck? We typically call them breakdowns and in our firm, we believe that breakdowns are turned into breakthroughs and they're turned into breakthroughs through the breakdown discussion. Let's identify what the breakdown was. Where was the breakdown? Was it a technical breakdown? Is it a core value breakdown? What is our commitment to resolve this breakdown? And how do we embed this back into standard operating procedures so that we turn it into a complete breakthrough? And most importantly, where do we take ownership? Where can each of us in this as stakeholders of this breakdown take ownership of this process and this breakdown?

Mike Merrill:

Now you mentioned unions there. Do you commonly utilize unions to try and help you out of a pinch or a patch or are you a completely union shop? I mean, tell me about that.

Mark Oden:

Yeah. We are a union signatory shop. We're actually signatory 26 unions around the country.

Mike Merrill:

Wow.

Mark Oden:

We are signatory with the UA and SMACNA, the sheet metal workers union as well. So we do hire or dispatch or recruit directly from these unions all around the country. And the union definitely helps us out of a pinch in terms of providing the trained detailers. And as I mentioned earlier, many of them

around the country have hooked into, and the national organizations, have understood the importance of training on both construction, which traditionally and historically they do, and technology.

Mike Merrill:

Interesting.

Mark Oden:

Yeah, and we're also, which I'm happy to chat about later, working with the unions and with the mechanical contractor associations around the country on how do we improve their training, or how do we introduce BIM and CAD training to their organizations where they might not already have them. So I'm very, very excited about that effort and how we're working to completely support the industry and the growth of all contractors around the country.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, that's a fascinating topic. That sounds like a whole other podcast episode to me. We'll have to get together and do that.

Mark Oden:

Sounds good, Mike, yeah. That's good.

Mike Merrill:

Awesome. So yeah, and in my brain, I'm thinking, okay, you've got union contractors who again, have been probably trained in the actual trades and in their skillset and other certifications on the physical side of the labor, but I find that fascinating that you're finding that many of them have training on the technical side and understand those tools as well. Is that continually getting better? Do you feel like that's in a lot better place than it was maybe five or 10 years ago?

Mark Oden:

Oh, I think so. And there's some unions that are at the forefront. UA 469, 393, 525, just to name a few. 208, local 208, for example. They're really at the forefront of understanding those training programs and merging the construction and technology industries together.

And part of my road show was to visit with business managers all over the country and help educate them on what BIM is, what CAD is, and how we can create a new classification of journeyman for them and how we can keep their guys to work as the entire industry shifts and takes a new focus. So it's been a lot of fun being a part of that change.

Mike Merrill:

That's cool. A new classification. Haven't heard of that either. So I'm learning all kinds of things today.

Mark Oden:

Very cool. Yeah, really I mean, we all have to innovate, we all have to modernize and the union I really see is grasping that full force and it's an honor really to be a part of it.

Mike Merrill:

So, Mark, this has been an awesome conversation so far today. I did want to just ask quickly, as far as a takeaway for the listeners, is there one thing that you hope that they leave this conversation with and remember?

Mark Oden:

Yeah, Mike, I would say that the digital transformation for the construction industry is absolutely here to stay and it's evolving very quickly. Firms like ours can help yours or partners excel in this transformation. I'm very excited about it, I'm dedicated to it, and I appreciate you for bringing us on today, Mike.

Mike Merrill:

Absolutely. It's been a lot of fun. So I do want to ask a couple personal questions real quick before we wrap up. Is that okay?

Mark Oden:

No worries. Absolutely. Take your time.

Mike Merrill:

Awesome. Okay. So what's something that you're really grateful for in your professional life?

Mark Oden:

Yeah, I really feel it's the opportunity to continuously learn really. I mean, I've had the opportunity to work with incredibly talented colleagues, managers, clients, both from the technology industry and the construction industry, and to really have focused and honed in on my leadership skills. I think those are things that I'm grateful for everyday in my professional life.

Mike Merrill:

Love that. Great, great answer. All right. Last one. What is Mark Oden's superpower?

Mark Oden:

This is something I feel I've had and I've really nurtured and trained on, but it's the ability to hear, to see, and to recognize others, to care deeply and to help others reach their life goals. I enjoy that. I feel fulfilled through it and it's a lot of fulfillment for me to help others. So that's what I would say there, Mike.

Mike Merrill:

So Mark, this has been a fascinating conversation today. Loved having you on. I just wanted to give you an opportunity for those listeners that are interested in some of the things that you're talking about and some of the approaches and technologies and the training, or maybe collaborating, mentoring, whatever, that are interested in connecting with you, how's the best way they can get ahold of you?

Mark Oden:

Oh, thanks for asking Mike. Yeah, the best way to get ahold of me would be my email address, moden@bimdesigns.net, or our website directly at bimdesigns.net. Lots of great information there and access to our blogs and our podcast as well.

Mike Merrill:

Awesome. Well, thanks for sharing that. I'm sure people will find out useful, and hopefully we get some more opportunities for you to collaborate with others.

Mark Oden:

Thank you so much, Mike.