

How to Foster Growth in 2022:

EXPERT INSIGHTS FOR
AEC FIRMS

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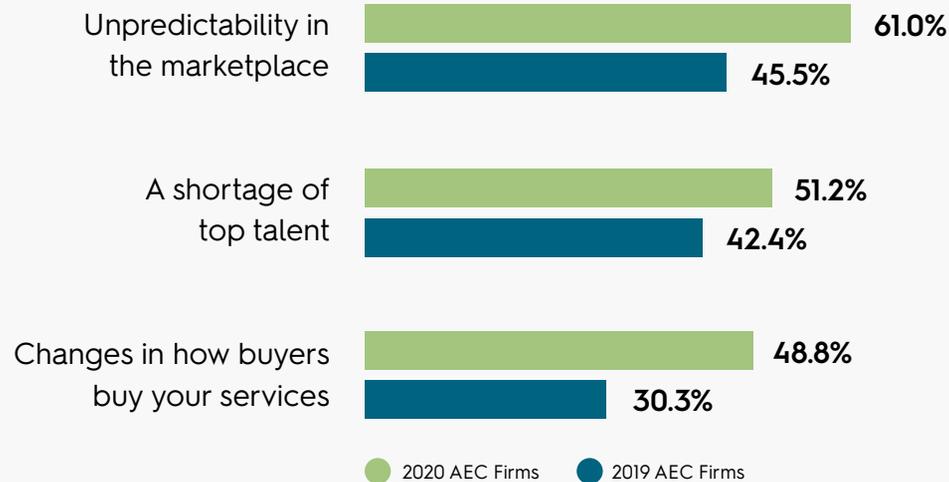
Akshay Mahajan, General Manager of AEC at Unanet

How to Grow Your Firm and Foster a Growth Mindset in 2022

Every month we speak with AEC leaders to survey the industry, determine the commercial forecast, uncover important trends, and find new ways to help our clients write better proposals and win more business. In doing so, we are always sure to ask the same two questions:

How do you anticipate the AEC industry to change in the coming year, and what is the best decision your team has made in the last year? Since the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the response we receive from AEC industry leaders is remarkably consistent.

Anticipated Business Challenges Over the Next 3-5 Years



source: <https://hingemarketing.com/blog/story/2021-high-growth-study-on-aec-firms-released>

Unpredictability in the marketplace is the primary concern, but the shortage of top talent, and the drastic shift in the way customers purchase and perceive AEC services has industry leaders worried about the future. As for the best decision made in the last year, the answer is fourfold:

- account-based marketing,
- purposeful brand strategy,
- SME (subject matter expert) buy-in, and
- authentic, honest storytelling.



Generate Growth For Good

EXPERT INSIGHTS FROM
EMILY BINNING, UK HEAD
OF BRAND AND MARKETING
AT WSP IN THE UK

To better understand these decisions and the concerns that prompted them, we spoke to *Emily Binning, the UK Head of Brand and Marketing at [WSP in the UK](#)*. She told us that the best way to foster growth in 2022 is to showcase the skill, passion and intellect of your team with authentic, insightful storytelling.

Showcase the Skill and Passion of Your Team with Authentic Storytelling

"I think that storytelling is really important because over 50% of B2B buying decisions are based on emotion." Says Binning, "When [customers] are in the room or they're looking at the bids, a significant part of their judgment is based on an emotional decision.

They want to hear from the people behind the brand. So, we are really pushing front and center for our people to tell our stories. If you can marry authentic storytelling with valuable insight – what you know about the customer, their goals and their pain points – that's magic."



I think that storytelling is really important because over 50% of B2B buying decisions are based on emotion."

Emily Binning



Combine Authentic Storytelling with Account-Based Marketing

“That’s why account based marketing is absolutely key.” Says Binning. “The more you know about your customer – their problems, their goals, and the industry they occupy – the more you can connect with them in a different and memorable way.”

According to Binning, that type of understanding can only come from a relentless obsession with the customer. *“To make sure that your firm is front-of-mind and that your clients see the value of working with you, you have to understand what your clients need, then target relevant content to the key people within that organization.”*

Binning’s insight corroborates the latest research from the [Harvard Business Review](#) that shows that the right brand positioning and message can differentiate your brand from that of your competitors, and stand out in a way that helps you achieve rapid, scalable growth.

“There isn’t a huge difference between us and our competitors.” Says Binning. “We are all technically excellent. We’re all trying to make the world a better place through the projects that we deliver.”

To find that differentiator, you have to be passionate and relentless about understanding your customer. That’s the only way you’re going to connect with them – by feeding that knowledge and insight into your campaigns, your content, and your client conversations.”

Use Marcomms to Foster Conversations Between Sales and the Client

Ultimately, says Binning, it’s marketing’s job to position the firm to win work by fostering conversations between sales and the customer. *“What the team and I are here to do is position the company to win work. We do that by helping our people start conversations.”*

The best way to foster those conversations, says Binning, is to identify themes that your clients consider valuable and cater to their interest by creating content centered around those themes.

“So it wouldn't just be ‘we're trying to win this bid.’ It would be, ‘we know that client X really wants a consultant who can demonstrate innovation... how do we work those themes into our content stream, what makes us different, and how do we reach those buyers?’”

Demonstrate the Social Value of Your Business

Though it's important to provide your clients with insightful content, says Binning, the primary goal of your marcomms team should be looking for ways to demonstrate the [social value](#) of your firm and brand.

“Our [clients are now demanding that corporations demonstrate their social value](#). There are, of course, corporate volunteer days and STEM activities that we are involved in, but it's broader than that. It's about growth for good, and showing that you can be profitable and make ethical decisions that have a positive impact on communities socially and economically.”

Be Honest, and Transparent. Avoid Greenwashing

Binning's insight corroborates the latest research from a [global study](#) that reveals [consumers are four to six times more likely to purchase, protect and champion purpose-driven companies](#).

“The scrutiny is really there, especially when it comes to greenwashing... There are a few brands, as of late, that have been called out for not being honest and transparent... Brands need to have purpose and be able to articulate that [purpose] in an authentic way, and have the evidence to back it up.”

According to Binning, irreverent boasts and [greenwashing](#) are not only detrimental to your branding efforts, they are also harmful to retention and recruitment.



Our clients are now demanding that corporations demonstrate their social value.”

Emily Binning

“Employees’ expectations about the relationship with their company and how they see that value exchange has shifted. The younger generations are coming through and almost interviewing the companies. They’re asking, ‘Why should I work for you?’ There’s a bit more of a moral compass and intent. They want to work for companies that are doing good.”



It’s really important that the marcomms team stay very close to HR and recruitment teams this year...That’s why our [marketing] strategy this year is focused on our people, brand and growth.”

Emily Binning

Foster Collaboration Between HR, Marcomms and Recruitment

This shift in worker sentiment coincides with a marked change in the makeup of marcomms and AEC teams. *“There has been a shift to agile blended teams due to the Great Resignation that has made the recruitment space really challenging right now.”* Says Binning, referring to the [mass exodus of workers](#) that has AEC firms scrambling to fill important roles.

Though many firms see the new team dynamic as a challenge, Binning sees the change to be beneficial for the makeup of WSP’s marketing team, and an opportunity for AEC firms to bring in new skills.

“As we bring contractors on board as part of our mixed team, we are recognizing that these individuals have deep knowledge and extensive experience, and are capable of dealing with senior stakeholders. They’re not distracted, and they’re really honed in when it comes to thinking and delivery.”

Binning’s insight on how to foster growth in 2022 will surely prove invaluable as AEC firms not only compete for business but also to recruit and retain new talent. The way to overcome these challenges, says Binning, is to promote collaboration between HR and marcomms teams.

“It’s really important that the marcomms team stay very close to HR and recruitment teams this year... That’s why our [marketing] strategy this year is focused on our people, brand and growth.” Says Binning. *“It’s about being a brand with purpose, being fun to work with, delivering the right outcomes for our clients and the communities we work in, and fostering growth in new and established sectors.”*



Employees' expectations about the relationship with their company and how they see that value exchange has shifted. The younger generations are coming through and almost interviewing the companies. They're asking, 'Why should I work for you?' There's a bit more of a moral compass and intent. They want to work for companies that are doing good."

Emily Binning

Become a Brand with Purpose

Fostering growth for good is a recurring theme that is likely to permeate every facet of the AEC industry in 2022. As AEC leaders progress into the year looking to grow their business, they are advised to:

- be passionate and relentless about understanding their customers,
- showcase the skill, expertise and passion of their teams, and
- utilize authentic, honest storytelling to show that they are a brand with purpose.

Moreover, they need to consider the ways in which they can drive growth for good, and make their business more accessible to employees, customers and the community. *"We're educating ourselves and working really hard to make our website, our graphics, our color palettes more accessible."* Says Binning.

"Short of a massive rebrand, we're doing everything we can to deliver accessible and inclusive communications, and educating ourselves so that we continuously improve ourselves and the community."



Create a Clear and Purposeful Brand

EXPERT INSIGHTS FROM
RICHARD GOLDING,
SENIOR CREATIVE IN
CHARGE OF DISRUPTIVE
GROWTH AT GLEEDS

For more insight on how AEC firms can foster growth in 2022, we turn to Richard Golding, who is part of the London Marketing team at [Gleeds](#), an international property and construction consultancy. He told us that clarity and consistency are key to a successful brand strategy.

Clarify Who You Are and Why Your Brand Exists (Be Consistent)

"You must be clear as to why the business—your brand—exists, and be able to pass that inspiration on to your employees and your audience." Says Golding. *"In this respect, consistency is key."*

Golding's insight corroborates the findings from [The State of Brand Consistency 2019](#) report compiled by Lucidpress, which found that inconsistent brand usage has a negative impact on customer opinions and their willingness to conduct business with you.

24.5%

stated that inconsistent branding creates confusion in the market

18.6%

noted that inconsistent branding damages a company's reputation or credibility.



You need to know how many [people] in the organization know your mission statement... and be confident that the experience they provide is aligned with the overall brand strategy."

Richard Golding

Unfortunately, says Golding, most AEC marketing teams have missed the mark when it comes to providing a consistently authentic and authoritative brand image. *"You look at some mission statements and it's just waffle. It doesn't mean anything in particular. It sounds nice. It sounds emotive. But it really doesn't underpin the reason for their existence."*

According to Golding, *"you need to know how many [people] in the organization know your mission statement... and be confident that the experience they provide is aligned with the overall brand strategy."* To date however, only half of all employees surveyed in the above report believe they have the tools they need to effectively enhance their employer brand.

Remember That People Do Business with People

"It's critical that property and construction firms focus on the relationships that they build, as well as the sales that they make." Says Golding. "In its earliest form, [branding] was marking livestock with a hot branding iron to identify ownership. Today, it's more about defining your reason to exist in the world, and striking a balance between professionalism and personality."

To Golding, AEC marketing is a long game that, unlike conventional sales and traditional marketing, should focus on the long-term business objective. *"It's best to think of branding as playing the long game... Just because a brand campaign might not necessarily result in an immediate sale, that doesn't mean it wouldn't be effective for the future. People don't like pushy sales tactics!"*

Secure Buy-In and Ownership from All Levels of Your Business

Though clear and purposeful brand strategy are important, says Golding, so is SME buy-in and securing ownership from all levels of your business. *"Clear and purposeful brand strategy from visionary leaders is essential, but an even bigger consideration is how to secure buy-in and ownership at all levels of the business."*



It's always important to look back at your key targeted accounts and see how it aligns with the brand purpose at each stage."

Richard Golding

Senior leaders may understand and see the value in branding, but how does this trickle down to other ranks? How are you going to inspire everyone in the company to play their independent roles within the bigger mission?"

Combine Purposeful Brand Strategy with Insight from Leadership

According to Golding, the key to growth in 2022 is to combine purposeful brand strategy with value-added thought leadership from subject matter experts. *"You might have a strong following on your company's LinkedIn page, but the customer would much prefer to hear from the boots on the ground, the surveyors, the suppliers..."*

These are the voices that flow with authenticity. They have confidence around the subject matter; and at the end of the day, they are the ones that are going to develop these leads into new business."

Align Sales Funnel To Brand Purpose with Account-Based Marketing

According to Golding, one of the best ways to develop those sales is to align your sales funnel with your brand purpose via account-based marketing. *"It's always important to look back at your key targeted accounts and see how it aligns with the brand purpose at each stage."*

In its simplest form, [account-based marketing] is essentially identifying the clients you want to work with – doing your market research and forming a strategy – then building your marketing plan around that."

Take Ownership of Brand Message with User-Generated Content

According to Golding, [user-generated content](#) is one of the best ways to not only appeal to your top accounts, but also secure buy-in from subject matter experts. *"The key to success is to build a framework of content and support that gives users the tools and assets that empower them to take ownership of the brand message."*



If the top-level strategy is lined up, everyone knows the vision, and you've got the right collateral in place, then it's really quite valuable for a business to transpose that ownership over to their people."

Facilitate Clear, Open and Accessible Digital Asset Management

To facilitate that kind of ownership, says Golding, you need [a digital asset management solution](#) that is accessible to everyone in the organization. *"Ownership of assets and message is important, but I think that's where a good digital asset management system comes into play.*

It's key that the platform is open and completely accessible throughout the organization. If it isn't, you get bottlenecks, you get mixed messaging. You get people grabbing stuff off of Google Images or using someone else's copy, which muddies the message. So clear, open, and accessible digital asset management is very important."

Earn Trust and Credibility with Consistent Branding

AEC firms earn trust and credibility by crafting a consistent brand message, designing consistent visuals, and providing a high level of quality service to their customers on a consistent basis.

Unfortunately, these processes are often muddled by inefficient workflows, disparate digital assets, and a lack of collaboration between team members. As the only digital asset management system designed for the built world, OpenAsset can:

- improve workflow,
- increase efficiency, and
- bring order to your digital assets,

but it can not provide the credibility, nuance and authority you need to create a winning proposal. For that, you need a subject matter expert.



Encourage SME Collaboration

EXPERT INSIGHTS FROM
FROM LINDSAY DIVEN,
MARKETING AND SALES
MANAGER AT FULL SAIL
PARTNERS

Fortunately, we spoke with Lindsay Diven, Marketing and Sales Manager at [Full Sail Partners](#), who told us how to foster collaboration between SMEs, proposal writers and the rest of your firm.

Communicate Critical Pursuits with SMEs Before the RFP Announcement

"The best thing to do is to get ahead of the project before it's advertised, and start talking about how you're going to pursue it when you're not under a deadline... Your subject matter experts, your proposal team... just make sure that everybody is on the same page, especially when it comes to prioritizing."
Says Diven.

"It also helps when you have a crystal clear list of your must-win pursuits... Then you can start developing those win strategies and get in those rooms and start brainstorming the nuances of the project... But once the RFP is advertised, you're on the clock. Now it's time to get that proposal done and actually put pen to paper."

““

The best thing to do is to get ahead of the project before it's advertised, and start talking about how you're going to pursue it when you're not under a deadline..."

Lindsay Diven



Don't start with a blank page... You'll get a lot more response if you give them something like a Q and A... Give them some questions to answer."

Lindsay Diven

Get to Know Your Subject Matter Experts

"If it's architects and engineers, I always try to get them into a conference room physically or a virtual conference room these days to talk... Just to get that conversation and that brainstorming going."
Says Diven.

"Then you, as the proposal manager, should be taking lots of notes... then you can follow up with them and be like, okay, you were talking about this one aspect of the driveway and how it needs to be designed. Can you expand on that for me?"

Be Specific with What You Need, and When You Need It

"Don't just say, 'hey, can you give me a project description for this other elementary school we did three years ago.' Say 'here's the elementary school we did. It was an urban infield project. What challenges did we face?'"

According to Diven, it's best to come prepared and be specific. *"Don't start with a blank page... You'll get a lot more response if you give them something like a Q and A... Give them some questions to answer."*

Don't Start with a Blank Page (Give Your SMEs Something to Edit)

"If you have a write up, say here's the write up. How can we address the urban info better in this description, or here's a project approach from that previous elementary school. How can you adapt this to make it relevant to this new project that we're pursuing? That's the ideal situation." Says Diven.

Meet Your Team Where They Are

Unfortunately, the ideal situation Diven describes is far from the norm. More often than not, SMEs are over-worked, over-committed and/or simply unable to lend their insight to your project.

“Not everybody's a good writer or they're very intimidated by writing. But if you could just sit there and talk with somebody... you can use your writing skills to write it all up. Then all they have to do is review it for technical accuracy.”

Build Relationships with Subject Matter Experts

“I had one project manager, I knew after working with him on two proposals that he would never, ever write anything down... He couldn't stop long enough to sit down and write.” Says Diven.

“So, I would just go [to his office] with a cappuccino from the break room and pepper him with questions, and just use my phone to record [his answers] and then go write it up. He loved it because we were just sitting there drinking coffee. But in like 15 minutes, I'd get 60 or 70% of what I needed, and he would just fine tune the rest of it.”

Make Your Write-Ups Searchable and Accessible to Pursuit Teams

“With all those write-ups,” says Diven, *“you will have to store those somewhere, make them searchable by keywords and organize them in a way that makes them accessible to your pursuit teams... It just makes work more efficient. Who doesn't want that?”*

Diven's insight corroborates the results of Deloitte's [2021 engineering and construction industry outlook](#) which found an increase in connected technologies and associated investments can help firms realize new operational efficiencies.



Provide a Frictionless User Experience

EXPERT INSIGHTS FROM
FROM AKSHAY MAHAJAN,
GENERAL MANAGER OF
AEC AT UNANET

For more insight on connected technologies and software investments, we spoke to Akshay Mahajan, General Manager of AEC at [Unanet](#), who told us that AEC firms can accelerate their digital transformation with technology solutions that provide a frictionless user experience.

Adopt Technology Solutions that Provide a Frictionless User Experience

"From an AEC perspective, you don't have a lot of time. Technology has lagged for so long that the need [for digital transformation] has increased dramatically, but so has the need to recruit and retain. These things really emphasize the need to accelerate technology adoption, especially in regards to creating a better user experience."

Though the AEC industry made significant strides to digitize workflows during the COVID-19 pandemic, Akshay believes that most AEC firms are still decades behind their counterparts in other industries.

"The AEC industry is technologically lagging behind other industries by ten, fifteen, twenty years. AEC firms have been catching up, especially in the last two years when the demand for technology has jumped through the roof."

Akshay's insight corroborates the [latest findings from McKinsey](#) that show the construction industry to be one of the slowest industries to adopt process and technology innovations.

These findings reveal an AEC industry that is less adaptable to change, and less prone to evolve from analog to digital than other industries – a problem that Akshay says will only get worse.



The technology companies who do not shift to the frictionless user experience in the next five to ten years are going to become extinct.”

Akshay Mahajan

“The technology companies who do not shift to the frictionless user experience in the next five to ten years are going to become extinct. If we do not consciously think about our user experience every single day, then we are not going to be in the market. It will only get harder for those who don't.”

Though the AEC industry lags behind in terms of digitalization and technological adaptability, Akshay believes the industry can catch up. “In terms of technology adoption, firms who promote a frictionless user experience can really close the gap.”

Use Frictionless Technology To Create a Better Employee Experience

“That said, the software companies still have a long way to go to make technology accessible by creating frictionless user experiences.

To choose a solution that employees will actually use, says Akshay, you need to change your perspective. “We need to help our users adopt new technology, by thinking from the user perspective... A marketer in AEC doesn't wake up in the morning wondering how they can effectively use software. They wake up in the morning thinking about how they can get their proposals out on time.”

Choose A Solution that Employees Will Actually Use

According to Akshay, rate of adoption and the cost of implementation are related to ease of use. “If it's difficult to use, then you will need training. That means more people involved and more time to implement resulting in increased cost and decrease ROI.”

Akshay's insight corroborates [research](#) originally published in the International Journal of Civil Engineering and Technology, which found that perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness will determine the attitude and adoption level of the user.

“The biggest reason for that is the people themselves. People who are coming out of colleges – the people we're trying to recruit and retain – they do not have the patience to deal with bad technology.”



Technology can create that differentiator for you and create that great employee experience – to help your team feel more gratified with their jobs rather than fighting with technology all day."

Akshay Mahajan

Prioritize Solutions that Make It Easier to Work and Win More Business

"In today's environment," says Akshay, "a great user experience is something that your employees want. It directly impacts the employee experience, which directly impacts your ability to attract and retain talent."

According to Akshay, a frictionless user experience is a benefit to firms looking to overcome recruitment challenges. *"That's actually one of my pet peeves. Not just in the AEC industry, but every industry. Salary is no longer a differentiator... Employee experience is critical."*

"Fortunately," says Akshay, "technology can create that differentiator for you and create that great employee experience – to help your team feel more gratified with their jobs rather than fighting with technology all day."

Choose Features that Enable Your Team to Work More Effectively

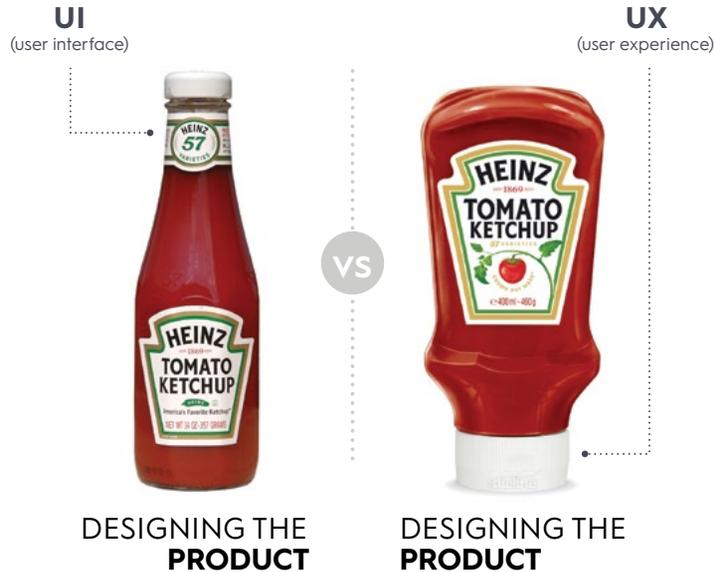
"In regards to accessibility, if you're talking to [AEC Marketers] about how cool a feature is, that's not what they resonate with. But, if you tell them how that feature is going to help them do their job better, then they'll be able to actually relate to it much better and use [the tool] more effectively."

According to Akshay, that kind of empathy and accessibility are key to growth in 2022. *"I am a firm believer that a lot of technologies have made technology inaccessible for normal human beings... I also think the pandemic proved the value of empathy in the user experience..."*

If you think about the great resignation, and all the things that people are talking about, discontent with their jobs and all that stuff. I think there is more empathy in people than ever before."

Think from a User Perspective To Make a Better User Experience

According to Akshay, the need for empathy in the user experience has only increased since the pandemic. *"We had no other choice but to use technology [during the pandemic] because no one was in the office to do it manually."*



Source: <https://www.dhonyportfolio.com>

So, in a way, the pandemic has helped to bring the need for technology adoption to a higher level."

A great example of creating frictionless user experience is the ketchup bottle and how it has evolved to provide that experience.

"It's a simple example as it relates to providing a frictionless user experience," says Akshay, "but it's a positive example of thinking from a user perspective to make a better user experience."

Akshay went on to describe the frictionless user experiences he's encountered that resonate with him and his team. *"One of the things that I actually really enjoyed about OpenAsset is the user experience. I've had a lot of people do the demo and talk about the product.. It really resonates with me because you understand that your customers are project-centric. They're searching for projects, not images."*

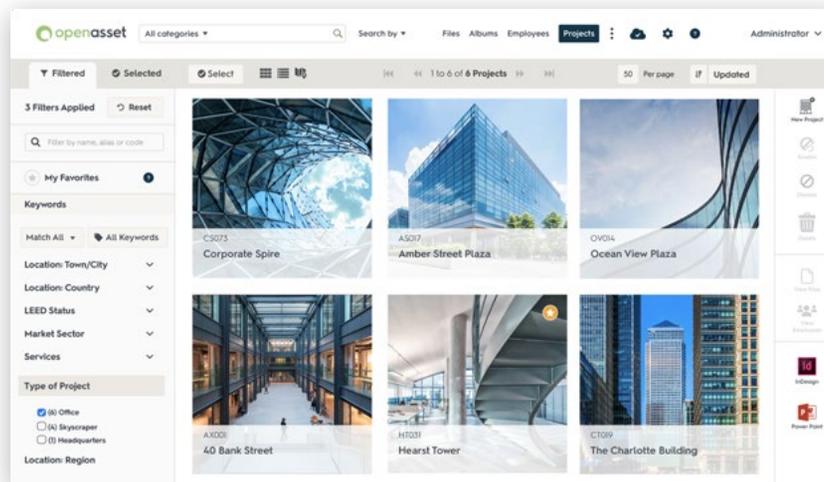
Ultimately, says Akshay, *"OpenAsset is like the plastic, upside down ketchup bottle that everyone likes, compared to the glass bottle that is the source of the frustration... I'd rather use this solution, than bang my head against the wall with some of the other tools out there... and that's true with any software in today's age that thinks about the user experience in that manner."*

Implement a Digital Asset Management System

Akshay's insight corroborates the results of a [Construction Industry Survey](#) conducted by OpenAsset, which found that 89% of respondents believe a DAM solution would increase the overall efficiency of their staff and reduce their level of stress.

Fortunately, digital asset management is now top of mind for AEC industry executives looking to grow their firm and secure new business opportunities in 2022. Moreover, digital technologies like OpenAsset are now considered essential to the promotion of AEC brands.

Why? Because, unlike traditional systems, OpenAsset is designed exclusively for the AEC firms that build our world and shape our society. With seamless functionality, a user-focused experience and project-based workflows, OpenAsset is the only DAM with the power to automate your marketing efforts, improve brand consistency, optimize the proposal writing process and enable your team to do their best work. And at the end of the day, there is no better way to grow your business, than to empower your team.



89% of respondents believe DAM solution would increase the overall efficiency of their staff and reduce their level of stress.

Construction Industry Survey

Stay Tuned for More Expert Insight from OpenAsset

OpenAsset would like to extend a special thank you to *Emily Binning, the UK Head of Brand and Marketing at WSP in the UK, Richard Golding, the Senior Creative in Charge of Disruptive Growth at Gleeds, Lindsay Diven, Marketing and Sales Manager at Full Sail Partners, and Akshay Mahajan, General Manager of AEC at Unanet* for their incredible insight on how to foster growth in 2022.

[Follow the link for more expert insight](#) or [schedule a demo](#) of OpenAsset with one of our solution experts. Don't forget to follow OpenAsset on [social media](#) for exclusive offers and valuable insight for AEC and Real Estate firms.

[Schedule a Demo >](#)

About OpenAsset

OpenAsset is the number one project-based Digital Asset Management (DAM) solution for Architecture, Engineering, Construction, and Real Estate firms. It is delivered and supported by Axomic, which has a global presence with staff based in London and New York.



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