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Putting Palm Pilots into the Hands of Hardhats

It took general contractor Webcor Builders Inc. just 10 months to complete the 236-room Serrano Hotel in San Francisco--two months less than initial estimates. New building techniques? Faster-drying concrete? Nope. Just better communication, thanks to the Web. While most of the \$726 billion construction industry still relies on crumpled blueprints and bicycle messengers, Webcor, based in San Mateo, Calif., is as wired as the rest of Silicon Valley.

How does the 29-year-old company, which had "Web" in its name before the Internet even existed, do it? By ensuring that the dozens of partners on a project are connected to one another. Webcor uses software to make drawings and data instantly available, and it installs high-speed phone lines at each construction site. Webcor President Andrew J. Ball hands out Palm handheld computers, too, so customers can monitor ongoing projects. The savings are enormous. Webcor manages a \$60 million project with the same number of managers it took to handle a \$20 million project. And Ball can relax on one point: He won't need to hand out Palms for Webcor's latest project--building Palm's new Santa Clara campus.