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Technology for Efficiency – The Sky's the Limit! by Libby Maurer

Those of us who have studied the height of the Industrial Revolution have a firm grasp on how Whitney's cotton gin improved technology to spur a domino effect of improved factory efficiency. But we are playing a whole new ball game with today's technology. Not only can we reach the most remote pocket of the world with one click of the mouse, but now performing everyday business applications and reaching customers has become more effortless (and more important) than ever before. With no end in sight to the many advances of technology, the sky's the limit for component manufacturers to provide enhanced customer service and increase efficiency.

TECHNOLOGY: CUTTING EDGE OR CUTTING CORNERS?

What do component manufacturers see as the benefit of implementing technology in their daily routines and using it to its full potential? Roy Schiferl of Woodinville Truss Inc. in Woodinville, WA stated, "We use technology to distinguish ourselves from the rest of the crowd. The way I see it, we have no choice in this industry but to strive to be different than everybody else. We are always trying to stay on the cutting edge of technology to serve our customers more efficiently and more accurately. Technology helps us get there."

Still other component manufacturers cling to old school doctrine of "less technology is more," out of disenchantment for the shortcomings and complications of emerging technology. One Texas component manufacturer wondered, "We were building trusses just fine twenty years ago with a hammer and a bunch of plates, but sometimes I ask why it can't still be as simple as it used to be?"

Keith Kinser of Kintec, LLC, Pewee Valley, KY, offered this observation on the component manufacturing industry's sluggish implementation of technology for efficiency and improving customer service. "Our industry as a whole has made very poor use of the technology that is available. More often than not, this has been due to the financial considerations that most of us face running fairly small operations. That being said, I think that the market is demanding that we have the capability to respond to our customers needs with a flexibility and speed that only the embracing of technology will allow."

Have we really been reluctant to roll with the changing technology that the market is now demanding? Or have we actually been jaded by the technology that makes our lives easier and our truss plants more efficient? Not according to Terry Tontarski of Fabco-Tontarski in Watertown, NY. "If precision and quality is what we, in our industry, are striving for, I think we need to view technology as a means to increase productivity while maintaining or even enhancing quality."

Dan Holland of Clearspan Components, Meridian, MS, agrees. "The single greatest opportunity

our industry has revolves around the use and processing of information. Most people fail to realize that our business is very information-intensive. For instance, the amount of data it takes to describe the details of one wall panel is immense, not to mention the amount of information required to describe that wall panel's position in relation to the rest of the structure's design."

Holland matter-of-factly pointed out that technology—through the advent of computers and advanced design software—has given our industry the opportunity to achieve design complexities like never before. "We have the chance to employ the computer in handling this complex information automatically to bypass what human beings will never accomplish: eliminating human error."

SALES

"If we see our sales staff more than once a week, they aren't being effective," said Aaron Roush, Branch Manager of Automated Building Components Inc. in Sharon, WI. Roush reported taking the following measures to help outside sales reps become more efficient. "Each of our outside sales reps have the full design software packages on their laptops, so they can give quotes without having to make an extra trip back to the office," he said.

Schiferl detailed their answer to the sales efficiency dilemma. "Our salesmen drive big conversion vans. We've essentially set up mini-offices in the back with fax machines and computers. This gives every salesman the capability to do their own quotes right there on site." An added advertising bonus to Schiferl's traveling salesmen? "On each side, the vans display company contact information and a picture of a big wood truss. The guys don't know it, but they're driving a moving billboard!"

DESIGN & PRODUCTION

For Tontarski and his crew of cutting-edge technology buffs at Fabco-Tontarski, leading industry technology is a way of life. Tontarski remembers entering the industry in 1979, when "no one had 3D design technology." Tontarski decided to turn to Online Data, and became the first component manufacturer in New York State to implement the technology. "During the early 90's," he remembers, "3D design software developed. Most recent advances in the industry have really concentrated on the enhancement of production."

Tontarski leans on new technology in his truss plant simply because, "if our shop does not have the support to carry out our designs, that means we are spending an inordinate amount of time trying to accommodate those designs. We are in business to design and build trusses, not sit around and decide whether we have the capability to perform in the plant."

"We determine where the bottlenecks in our plant exist and those are the places we use technology and new equipment the most." Tontarski singled out the saw department's work as the bottleneck and created a system, using new technology, to increase the sawyers' efficiency and production. With a live deck, cutting-edge saws, a logical batching process, laser ink-jet printer and a lumber shuttle, Tontarski has completely orchestrated the entire saw process for optimal efficiency and corrected the problem of not being able to keep up with the assembly

team. "Now we've eliminated those gaps of down-time that we used to have when the saw operators were wondering what they could do next."

So while we can dispute its degree of efficiency and flat-out reject technology's quirky antics until the end of the world as we know it, there is one truth that all component manufacturers would agree on, reiterated best by Holland, "We can't afford to ignore or deny human error."

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