

Automation

straight talk

by Jerry Koskovich, P.E.

Mechanical Morale Boosters

Automation doesn't just do things *for* people. It does things *to* people.

Some years ago I recall bringing a friend from outside the industry into a truss plant to demonstrate our automated component saw. My friend, while familiar with manufacturing and distribution plants (his company employed about 250 people), had never been in a component manufacturing plant before.

The gantry tables were first in sight and we stopped to watch them. Workers were on the table tacking the connector plates, which I explained. We had to step back several times to make way for component-loaded carts to wheel through. Then I took him to the cutting area. He kept looking this way and that along the tour.

I knew what I was seeing, but I had no idea what he was seeing until we went to lunch. He described the truss building scenario we witnessed from a little different perspective—people “leaping on and off tables,” periodically getting down on their knees and beating things with a hammer, railroad carts with “colored tin cans” on their handles “squeaking” by. His comments were not critical or belittling, but more an expression of surprise.

He didn't realize how far our industry had already come in such a short time. And maybe I didn't appreciate how far behind we still were in some ways. He concluded that insurance rates had to be sky high and that it must have been tough to keep good workers. His prophecy was that the kind of automation we were involved in would make a world of difference in a truss plant when it came to employee morale and overall employee performance. At the time, I can't say I gave it that much thought.

Now I'm here to tell you that the biggest unforeseen benefit of automation in component manufacturing plants is probably just that—increased employee morale and the improved employee performance that comes from it. I'm not talking about some “fuzzy,” motivational poster type of benefits. I'm talking about fundamental benefits that begin to show up in bottom lines from the get-go.

I'll tell you what I've observed and the comments I've received with regard to the installation of automated equipment. I suspect manufacturers of other automated equipment for component manufacturing plants hear and experience similar things.

- **The morale boosting starts the minute the new piece of automated equipment hits the receiving dock.** Typically, all eyes turn to it. The mere fact that a company is installing a several hundred thousand dollar saw says they're going places, they're enhancing the operation, business is strong and committed. In a nutshell, workers can see that they're working for a progressive company. Also, with anything new and maybe especially in truss plants where technology is just making a big leap in automation, there's a wave of excitement that reverberates through the plant.

Continued on page 82

at a glance

- His prophecy was that the kind of automation we were involved in would make a world of difference in a truss plant when it came to employee morale and overall employee performance.
- When you install a new piece of equipment like an automated saw, your plant will perk up in ways you likely hadn't anticipated.



www.southernpine.com

504/443-4464 • FAX 504/443-6612

For reader service, go to www.sbcmag.info/spc.htm

DISCOVER THE COST SAVINGS when using Southern Pine, offering superior strength, stiffness, and plate-holding ability. The Southern Pine Council's new brochure *Southern Pine for Structural Components* details these savings using a direct design comparison between lumber species for a typical project. Request or download your free copy at www.southernpine.com, your source for the latest Southern Pine lumber information.

S O U T H E R N P I N E : Y O U R C H O I C E F O R C O M P O N E N T S

- **Old sawyers get new life.** For some dyed-in-the-wool sawyers, the new automated saw will represent a threat and “too much learnin’.” But that’s the exception and substantially outweighed by just the opposite attitude. Most good sawyers will welcome automation as a way to simplify and improve the quality of their work. Their performance improves. I’ve been told by many a plant that their workers vie to operate the new equipment.
- **Producing higher quality work simply makes you feel better.** I’m sure a psychologist would have fancier terms for this but, put simply, we all like to do a good job and feel better about ourselves and everything around us when we do. A properly maintained automated saw turns out consistently spot-on perfect parts (allowing for the effects of less-than perfect lumber)—you can’t help but feel good about what you’re producing. Contributing to the “I’m-doing-a-good-job” feeling are easy-to-read part markings applied by the saw’s ink-jet printer (ID numbers, job numbers, etc.) There’s never any debate over incorrect and/or scribbled, hard-to-decipher markings. All said, when you’re consistently producing near-perfect parts, you like what you’re doing and your performance reflects it.
- **The same attitude begins to permeate the plant.** It’s like throwing a rock in a pond at the automated saw station and watching the ripples move out. When the cut parts get to the truss table or assembly station and builders can decipher the markings without a struggle, when parts fit together like they should, and—on top of all that—there aren’t any missing parts, the truss and panel builders start feeling better about the quality of their work. There are fewer errors (and less finger-pointing), and there’s a lot more predictability in their build routines. It all goes quicker and easier.
- **A safer environment and employees know it.** With the ability of some automated saws to cut even very small parts (down to several inches) and all-but-infinitely long scarf cuts, pull saws and chop saws start gathering dust. Workers know the plant has a concern for their safety because more and more cutting is being pulled off these types of manual saws. Employees may not express it; it may even be subconscious, but hazardous conditions can be the source of underlying apprehension that manifests itself in the form of irritability, frustration and reduced production.
- **We all like to be proud of our job, and running a quarter-million-dollar piece of high tech equipment is something to be proud of.** I still remember the time my mother judged me worthy of taking the wheel of our '37 Ford. I’ve experienced similar feelings throughout my life when I’ve been put in the driver’s seat, so to speak, of everything from expensive development projects to expert witness testimony. Operators of an expensive new high-

tech saw have every right to be proud and, most often, it shows—in renewed dedication and day-to-day performance. I suspect the better attitude goes home with him, too.

- **Production reports become scorecards—and good employees are always trying to increase their scores.** An automated saw monitors its production and produces reports—how much lumber was processed, how many components were cut, etc. These reports can be immensely valuable to management. They also have the side benefit of giving saw operators goals to shoot for. I’ve known operators who were effectively racing against other saws in the plant. I’ve also known operators who race against themselves—trying to better their “score” over yesterday’s or last week’s. Production benefits are obvious.
- **As the new automated saw impacts component production, other steps in the truss or panel-building process naturally pick up in pace.** I cannot say definitively why this occurs, but it typically does. Obviously, a consistent flow of accurately cut parts is underlying everything—no more mis-cuts, re-cuts, and forgot-to-cuts. And at least part of the stepped-up production pace outside the cutting area could be due to the fact that the slower manual cutting had previously been setting the plant’s pace. It could also be due to the natural human phenomena of not wanting to be one who’s holding things up as the flow of cut components increases, so you almost subconsciously work more efficiently. This is not to say that you won’t create new bottlenecks—really just amplify existing bottlenecks, typically in the assembly area—when you increase cutting by multiples with a new automated saw.

In sum, when you install a new piece of equipment like an automated saw, your plant will perk up in ways you likely hadn’t anticipated. The whole work atmosphere is impacted—the result of more predictable production, consistently higher quality product, fewer mistakes and finger-pointing, and improved safety. Put simply, everyone feels better about what they’re doing, how they’re doing it, and how well it turns out. With the installation of additional automated equipment, which usually follows quickly when automation benefits begin to hit a company’s bottom line, all of the above is amplified and is even more securely embedded in a plant’s working atmosphere.

I recognize that, as a manufacturer of automated equipment myself, these comments could be interpreted by some as contrived to suit my own ends. On the contrary, and perhaps because I am an engineer and often blind to things that cannot be rendered to a blueprint (remember blueprints?), some of these benefits came as a surprise to me, too. Actually, it was more a series of small surprises along the way...unlike my friend that I mentioned up front. He got it in one big surprise. **SBC**

Jerry Koskovich is President of The Koskovich Company in Rochester, MN.

ANU PROSPECT

STEP DECK ROLL-OFF TRAILER



Patent Pending - Provisional Patent #60/688,789



2' & 4' Pull-Out Rollers Now Available!

NEW!
Pull Out Rollers now for:
36' - 50'
42' - 60'
48' - 70'
53' - 78'
48' & 53'



UNLOAD WALL PANELS... DAMAGE FREE!

100 SOUTH SERVICE ROAD, P.O. BOX 89, ST. MARYS, ONTARIO N4X 1A9

(519) 349-2202 or 1-800-615-5122

For reader service, go to www.sbcmag.info/anuprospect.htm

STRUCTURAL BUILDING COMPONENTS™

THE FUTURE OF FRAMING

www.sbcmag.info

Dear Reader:

Copyright © 2006 by Truss Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. For permission to reprint materials from **SBC Magazine**, call 608/310-6706 or email editor@sbcmag.info.

The mission of **Structural Building Components Magazine (SBC)** is to increase the knowledge of and to promote the common interests of those engaged in manufacturing and distributing of structural building components to ensure growth and continuity, and to be the information conduit by staying abreast of leading-edge issues. SBC will take a leadership role on behalf of the component industry in disseminating technical and marketplace information, and will maintain advisory committees consisting of the most knowledgeable professionals in the industry. The opinions expressed in SBC are those of the authors and those quoted solely, and are not necessarily the opinions of any of the affiliated associations (SBCC, WTCA, SCDA & STCA).



6300 Enterprise Lane • Suite 200 • Madison, WI 53719
608/310-6706 phone • 608/271-7006 fax
www.sbcmag.info • admgr@sbcmag.info