

## "WTCA Members on Software Technology" by Melinda Caldwell

Last November, in a speech to the National Press Club entitled, "Technology and Its Contribution to Productivity and Growth," National Association of Manufacturers President James H. Keyes made the following statement: "The image of manufacturing is being transformed from an old paradigm that relied on brawn to a new one that depends increasingly on brains, more specifically, on knowledge.... The fact of the matter is that growth comes from innovation and the application of technology, with a sharp focus on quality and the customer."<sup>1</sup>

Software technology and its application in the truss manufacturing industry has been an important factor in our specific industry's growth as well. Mary Pat Keller, Vice President of Truss Components, Inc. in Valley Park, Missouri, cited better information regarding profitability as the main reason that compelled her to implement software in their operations. "I believe that future profitability depends on knowing exactly where the profits come from," she stated. "If you are not looking at more sophisticated software now, you probably will be in the future. The way the margins have been squeezed, it is essential that you know as much as you can about your business."

WTCA members have taken a number of different avenues on the quest for more high-tech production tracking. Some, like Truss Components, have chosen to implement manufacturing software that was purchased from and installed by an outside software vendor. Others, like Dakota Craft in Rapid City, South Dakota, have opted to create production management software in-house. Design Manager Shannon Thornburg reported that they have developed a Microsoft Access-based database for job tracking.

No matter which lane your company chooses as you travel the highway of software technology, there are two major issues to keep in mind as you drive toward successful implementation:

- Don't bite off more than you can chew. A.C. Mendiones at Wood Structures in Biddeford, Maine, likened the process of implementing a new software system to manufacturing trusses for planned communities: "Divide the project into bite-sized 'phases.' Make sure you know what set of problems you MUST solve in the initial implementation—and what problems you'd like to solve in the next phase of implementation, and the phase after that. Do multiple small 'wins'—not one giant flop!"
- Successful training is key to successful implementation. According to Mendiones, the bite-sized approach is also important when it comes to training. "The big-bang theory does not apply to training!" he warned. "Establish what you must train for in order to support a 'first roll out.' Then, schedule another training session in two months, then another a couple of months later, then another. Your people won't be able to assimilate all the gory details in even a week of sitting in a class."

As the manufacturing industry in general continues to grow and improve by leaps and bounds, the truss industry is keeping pace. Implementing innovative production, data collection, cost and inventory tracking software systems has made it possible for the truss industry to get a detailed handle on what's coming in, what's going on with each job and what's leaving the plant in terms of quality, productivity and timeliness. When it's all said and done, being on top of this type of information means being on top of the profitability of your company from all angles.

<sup>1</sup>Keyes full speech can be read on the NAM web site at [www.nam.org/media/keyesnewsmaker.html](http://www.nam.org/media/keyesnewsmaker.html)

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