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President's Message



MARY PAT KELLER

"Technology - Too Important to Ignore" by Mary Pat Keller, 2001 WTCA President

Thirty years ago, a lot of thought wasn't given to technology in the truss business. If you had a photocopier you could send jobs to the shop without having to redraw them. That was progress. I remember the excitement that was created when you could transmit these drawings over a telephone line. The speed left something to be desired by today's standards, but at that time it facilitated the truss plant's ability to manufacture productively. Since that time, personal computers have made inroads and now T1 lines, local area networks and the Internet continue to advance the work that can be done.

The marketplace demanded innovation and the truss industry responded. There may have been a little kicking and screaming along the way, but here we are. The mergers and acquisitions that have become fairly common have helped move us down this road. These larger companies have more advanced systems than we have been exposed to in smaller companies. People from other industries are also finding themselves in the truss business. They bring technology with them and apply it where it makes sense. Among these trends, smaller companies are continuing to find ways to remain competitive.

In the shop, set-ups are automated at the saws as well as on the lines. One benefit of all this automation and computerization is, for the first time, we can know the answer to the elusive question "What does a truss cost?" We are probably still some distance away from receiving plans from architects or builders electronically and having them automatically feed into design software and then go straight to the shop for fabrication. The variety of software that architects use and the limited amount of proprietary software for truss design may delay this for some time because there is no standardized platform. But, while we now are dealing with electronic seals and signatures, and emailed start orders and PO's in the office, the shop—today—has the ability to easily and efficiently track a job through the shop and attach information, including labor cost, to any single truss or job.

When a bill of materials is created, the lumber and plates are deducted from inventory and allocated to a specific truss. Material purchases are now more a matter of planning than afterthought. Physical counts are compared to what was supposed to be used and the variances are recorded. All of this is done in the background while the real business of building trusses goes on.

After the information is sent electronically to the saw this job becomes "work in progress," making it easy to get that figure at the end of the month. The set-up is downloaded to the computer at the line and while the material is transferred to the line, either the computer moves the pucks for the set-up or a laser facilitates the set-up. Tape measures will be left around the shop for the skeptics. With the swipe of a wand, a bar code is used in the transmitting of labor data regarding the specific truss. The line it was built on and the employee on the line, including their pay rates, are all recorded for later review. When production is complete, another swipe of the wand moves it to finished goods. When the product ships, the dispatcher logs onto the system and indicates the date and time and an invoice can be produced. As you can see, asset control is a much easier task.

These things are in use now. The old saying, "If you do what you always have done, you will get what you always have gotten" is really true. If you are satisfied with the results of your business, then ignore this issue. If, on the other hand, you think you might be able to do better, then the May issue promises to be thought-provoking and may offer some ideas that you can begin to investigate for your company.

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