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Editor's Message

We've Come a Long Way, Haven't We? by Scott Arquilla

Automation and technology in this industry have seen great advancements since Carrol Sanford first introduced the metal truss plate in 1953. My first memory of our family business goes back 35 years or so when we took possession of a new Sanford Roll-A-Master roof truss line. It was the latest and greatest and the rolling gantry replaced the hydraulic pedestal system that we had prior to that time. That rolling gantry was eventually moved to another side of our plant and improved with another parallel rolling gantry. Each had a top eject system where the trusses rolled to exit our building. We still have parts of that system in use in other places in our plant. Of course, the Sanford line was only 12 feet tall—a bit short for the higher pitches of today. Back in the 1960's and 1970's, 5/12 was considered tall pitch for a roof truss.

When I left the banking business in 1989, our bank had one (large) briefcase style Compaq PC on our commercial lending floor. Does anyone remember how the keyboard unlatched from the CPU to reveal a small monitor on those machines? Our truss company was seemingly well ahead of the bank in the office technology front. We had two Compaq 386-30 (they were really fast) computers, with two monitors each, used to design trusses. Each computer had a nine pin dot matrix printer to get cutting and truss designs to the shop. The only thing was, we had three (four with Scott, the trainee) truss technicians, so we all shared the computers. Hand takeoffs were the norm. Those of us who have been in this business for over ten years can remember drawing truss layouts by hand. It's truly a lost art.

Now, we have computers at every truss technician's desk, laser printers when paper is needed, servers that send cutting to computer operated saws, and the Internet to send preliminary design information and then receive truss drawings from our software supplier, which are sealed by a truss design engineer when that is needed to meet market needs. Our plant isn't especially sophisticated in that we don't have lasers setting up truss configurations or computer stations at each truss line inputting work completed in the past hour. But we do have two computerized saws, a good system (we think) of material flow with minimal handling, new truss production lines, and adequate truss racking equipment to minimize hand carrying of trusses. We could convert all saws to those with computerized features, add laser layout for all truss lines, and reduce paper consumption by having computer stations at each truss production area. I am sure we will reach those levels of automation sometime in the future.

But, each level of automation comes with a price, some of which can be quite expensive. While labor savings, the selling tool used by equipment manufacturers, is sometimes difficult to analyze with every level of automation, adequate shop labor is becoming more difficult to come by for all of us. Sometimes, I think how nice it would be if we didn't have to worry about shop

labor. But then, we would be inundated with repairs to all the computerized equipment and robots in our plant. Clearly, every component manufacturer has to weigh the cost of automation to the payback in labor savings that the equipment provides to justify its purchase. Of course, there are times when we need to purchase new equipment just because the equipment is old, even though it still operates adequately.

In our plant, the most pressing bottleneck during our last production season was in our miter saw department. There are just so many pieces that a good sawyer can cut in an hour. One of the solutions was to automate a miter saw and the other was to replace it with any of the new improved versions of the saws. I was amazed with the number of saws on display at the 2002 BCMC tradeshow. I had the option of spending about $22,500 to automate or up to $125,000 with a new purchase where the sawyer (or his lesser-cost replacement) had to only feed the right lumber into one end. The decision was not an easy one, but I choose to pick the lower cost option and the result has been to almost double daily production. The automated existing miter saw will not do everything the expensive new saw would do, but it will do the vast majority of difficult cuts. Fortunately, we still have another miter saw to do those cheek cuts on hip end parts.

As businessmen and women, we must look at automation as a chance to improve some part of our operations. Whether it is reduced paper costs or improved accuracy or increased quantity of boards being cut in a given hour, we have to look at every option available. We may not choose to invest in every choice, but we always have to be willing to consider whether the choice is valid for our business. The best way to do this is to thumb through this issue of SBC Magazine and read all the articles on technology. Another way is to plan to attend BCMC 2003, which is scheduled in the Phoenix, AZ Civic Center from October 8-10, 2003. Mark your calendars now! The members of the BCMC Committee are doing their best to make this show the best yet for those in our industry. I encourage you all to attend and see for yourselves the New Frontiers in automation and technology in sunny Phoenix.

SBC HOME PAGE

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