

# QC

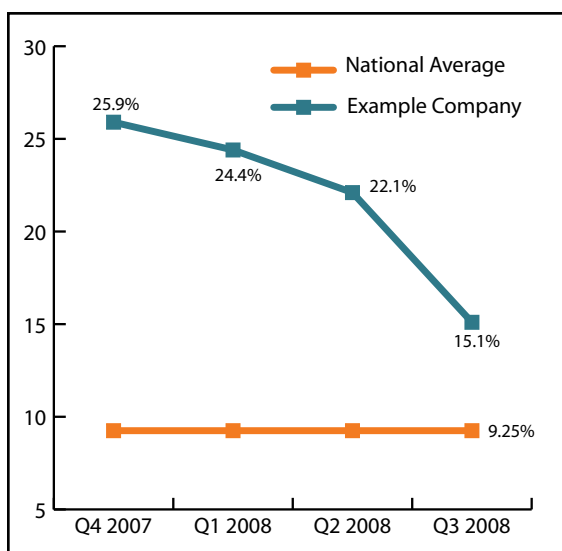
## Quality Control, not Quantity Constraint

by Libby Maurer

Now is the time to turn your attention to quality.

It's not the most forgiving business climate these days. Business is stretched, crews are being trimmed to bare bones, and we're heading into winter—typically the slowest of the seasons even in a good year. Clearly, now is not the time to spend time slowing production down to have more precise quality assurance for your components. Or is it?

Consider quality from a different perspective for a moment. Can you honestly say that less of a focus on quality doesn't matter right now? That you can afford the possibility of mistakes or callbacks? What about losing a customer? You could argue that it's more important than ever to focus on the business management aspect of quality and the information that it can produce. The question is—how do you focus on this while maintaining a steady production pace?



The chart shown above demonstrates a management information report available with In-Plant WTCA QC. The blue line shows that the average plate upsizing percentage of a company over four quarters is just over 15%. The orange line represents the average percentage of plate upsizing—9.25%—by all companies participating in the program over the same length of time. This information gives company management points of comparison upon which to make cost-saving business decisions.

The answer may just lie in making small adjustments to the process that get lost in the press of business everyday. Of course, you make minor adjustments every day with the goal of getting trusses out the door as fast as possible. But just a few more tweaks could mean the difference between disrupting production pace and having less focus and information about your products than would otherwise be available to you.

### No Need to 'Stop the Presses'

Tony Piek runs the In-Plant WTCA QC program for SBCA. He said while the goal of the program is to improve the education of plant personnel on what it takes to make a quality truss from a TPI 1 perspective, focus on incremental manufacturing process improvements and provide benchmarks upon which to compare inspection results, the program isn't meant to diminish efficiency. "Truss plants should know that there are ways to minimize the time taken away from production when doing inspections," he said. "We give people three keys: Be organized, be efficient, and be creative."

Creativity is exactly what's happening at truss plants contending with skeleton crews and production managers shuffling duties among the remaining crew members. Like Todd Gilligan at Cascade Mfg Co, who said decreased volume has forced him to take on QC inspection duties. "Just in the last four weeks I've taken on all the inspections for the first shift at one of our plants." The former inspector, he said, was needed in another of Cascade's plants to keep up with production.

Gilligan said his additional duties as safety manager don't allow him to keep a patterned inspection schedule, so he has to be flexible about when he can fit them in. "I'll do them over lunch or when the guys are on a break. And that way there's more randomness to what I'm inspecting too, which is the point of the process," he said. Whatever it takes, he said, even if it means after hours inspections. "Basically that's just the kind of company we are. What's the point of rolling the dice on our quality at a time like this?"

### QC Cross Training

With fewer bodies in the shop, it's important for workers to be skilled on all production stations in order to fill holes where needed. This kind of cross-training can be very helpful to QC inspections too, which is what Dennis Peters' crew at one ProBuild North plant has learned to do.

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"Our whole shop is trained to work the wall, roof and floor lines, so we feel that they should know how to inspect products coming off them all too," he said. Especially the lead people, he said, because they're the ones who are most likely to stick around when things get slow.

But the benefits of cross-training extend beyond ensuring efficient quality checks when crews are stretched. Peters said it's also helpful for filling in while someone is needed to do other important operational tasks, sick or taking a vacation. "This way, there's always a backup plan."

The investment of training workers to know what quality looks like, he said, may not seem like it pays off immediately. "But this is the time of year to expand that training—when it's slow. It'll pay off eventually."

In addition to heavily training his crews, Peters also insists on feeding back data to them. He said closing the feedback loop in that way helps to create a culture where quality inspections are expected and appreciated by each worker. "Every Tuesday after lunch, our production supervisor shares back the info with the guys. If something doesn't pass inspection we let them know. They all know the inspection process, and they all know that we put priority on it." Most importantly, he said, "They understand that we're not doing this program just to go through the motions. We mean it."

Peters said he understands that management doesn't want to spend more time than they have to inspecting trusses. "But now is the time we're looking at our systems to make sure we're being as efficient as possible while gathering the information we need to manage our operations more efficiently. We can't afford not to," he said. "We believe that now is the time to set a solid foundation."

### The Future of WTCA QC Is Providing Management Information

If there's one thing the downturn is teaching us, it's that understanding cost and performance on all levels of business is critical to long-term sustainability. In addition to its original function of verifying production quality in the context of the TPI 1 quality standard, In-Plant WTCA QC has grown into a robust management information tool. And it's become geared to serve exactly that need—providing benchmarks management can use to make sound, informed decisions. Piek's vision for the future of the program is to expand on the data available to management that is collected from each inspection and now reported quarterly.

Gilligan is already using data generated by the program make business decisions. For example, one of the QC reports spits out an average plate upsize percentage for the plant based on data collected during each inspection. That number helped Cascade identify a way to cut costs, he said. "We sat our

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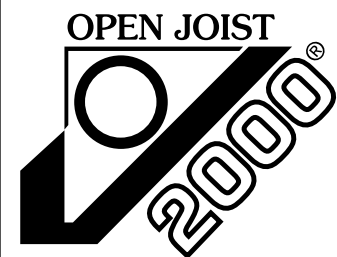
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providing valuable business insights that are not easy to see or readily available to the naked eye.

Soon, the QC program will undergo a series of enhancements to make the management reporting even more robust for component manufacturers. One goal, said, Piek, is to build technology into the program that will allow component manufacturers to access real-time Internet-based inspection reports and data. Piek envisions the real-time feedback will serve as an at-a-glance benchmarking tool, enabling plants to compare their inspection data with averages taken from all companies participating in WTCA QC. Given that each plant generates weekly QC data, it is feasible that every week there could be 132 new sets of data—the current number of certified plants—to enhance the information available to all participants.

“On the surface WTCA QC can easily seem like it is a mandatory pain in the neck of little value. But plants that dig into the data gathered tend to quickly realize that having a non-subjective evaluation of operations can provide greater insights than expected. There really is so much a plant can learn from their inspection data,” he said. “Using it to improve an operation’s effectiveness, efficiency and cost is where the true benefit is.”

#### In the Name of Quality

The message is clear: with a little creativity and flexibility, it is easy to make time for gathering key manufacturing data without sacrificing manufacturing efficiency. There are major benefits in viewing the WTCA QC program as a big picture management tool—not just another hoop to jump through.

“For us, using this program is not about beating the system,” said Gilligan, noting it takes the support of everyone in the company to benefit from it. “We get damn creative. And we’re in team effort mode. Right now we need everyone to be willing to get their hands dirty.” Peters said there’s no chance his operation will abandon its commitment to quality. “We’re in shuffle mode while things are tight like this. That includes quality...we will do whatever amount of rearranging necessary to continue the program. We’re just not willing to let it fall by the wayside.” **SBC**

*To learn more about the In-Plant WTCA QC program, visit [www.sbcindustry.com/wtcaqc.php](http://www.sbcindustry.com/wtcaqc.php) or contact Tony Piek at [tpiek@qualtim.com](mailto:tpiek@qualtim.com) or 608/310-6713.*

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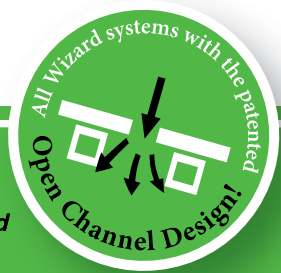
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[truss] builders down earlier in the year and told them that we wouldn’t be upsizing plates anymore. And we explained that meant they would have to pay more attention to quality since there would be less leeway in plate placement.” Since then, Cascade has watched its plate upsize average drop dramatically and has kept a close eye on how crews modified their operations to have accurate plate placement—all while maintaining production efficiency.

If not accurately accounted for, the cost of plate upsizing can fly very much under the radar, yet be a significant cost of operation. This is just one example of how the powerful management information capabilities of WTCA QC can be in



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