



Keeping tabs on production

Any sub-contracting company's first priority has to be obtaining orders. The second has to be delivering what is required within budget and on or before the due date. Inevitably, because of the emphasis on getting completed work out of the door, 'paperwork' tends to be pushed to one side in the process.

Hone-All Precision, a single source supplier of fully machined components, is more aware than most because of its focus on project managing the entire production process. It is this focus that prompted the Dunstable sub-contractor's participation in Stone Technology, a six-strong grouping of SMEs that has developed a comprehensive production control system marketed under the name 'Red Ant'.

According to Hone-All Precision co-director Andrea Rodney, "we believe that it is the quality, documentation, pricing and delivery prerequisites that should dictate the functionality of a system, not the dictates of a software supplier. The six companies that have formed Stone Technology are convinced that we have developed a generic system for the manufacturing industry that is specific enough to achieve the results and traceability that users require."

ISO 9001-accredited Hone-All Precision had previously been running its own-brand DOS-based system. This, says Andrea Rodney, had some of the company's larger OEM customers claiming that it provided more relevant information than their own expensive production control systems. "However, we wanted to come up with an even better system, with software developed by manufacturers who really understand the manufacturing process, and one that would provide users with all the software tools needed to run an efficient business. And the system had to be readily accessible to all the people involved in the production process, although with appropriate levels of security built in."

The result is Red Ant, a production control system that, for example, allows a machine operator to see what work is scheduled, what needs to be done, what operations are required and how long these will take. It also provides the flexibility to amend, say, the actual machining sequence, except where this is prohibited as part of a sealed layout for critical parts. This knowledge is retained within the system, and is instantly available to whoever next gets that particular job.

The system also enables the customer to be in control, as it provides virtually instant access for anyone seeking progress information. However, says Andrea Rodney, customers may need more than that, especially when it comes to prototypes and pre-production work. "They may want to know what the cycle time is likely to be should a part go into production, because this may decide whether a design is financially feasible and what design/process changes may be required. This is becoming an ever-more important issue for both the sub-contractor and the customer, because margins are under pressure and mistakes can be extremely expensive for either party."

Red Ant has been tested on several sites, which has enabled various discrepancies to be identified and remedied. Now, the intention is for the system to evolve, with both existing and new users initiating the development of new features that can then be installed retrospectively.

Says Andrea Rodney: "Any user will be free to select any data field, whether it is an employee record, a machine record or a job record – which may be selected by date or drawing number, and the required information is quickly and easily assembled into report form. If, for instance, you have become aware from information logged into the system that a machine is not performing to expectations, you can check whether it is a problem with the machine or with the operator, and whether you need to replace one or both.

"You can then calculate the best option for any given circumstance: how much is that machine going to earn if I keep it? Would it be better to sub-contract the work and sell the machine? Does the operator need training? Or replacing? The system uncovers things that you might not otherwise know about or seek to investigate, because obtaining the relevant information would take forever and, anyway, you may never get to the bottom of a particular situation.

"With Red Ant everything you need to know in order to control every aspect of your business is here. It identifies what is happening within a business and provides the wherewithal to cut out weaknesses. What Red Ant won't do, though, is provide the drive and initiative that is a prerequisite for survival in a highly competitive environment. At the end of the day that is still down to the people running the business, although with this new software they will have significantly better odds on succeeding."



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