

Focus on the core processes

A no-strings rental arrangement for business software systems, whereby customers can increase or reduce their user-licence at will, provides flexibility in times of uncertainty.

By Guy Amoroso

IT is clear that computer solutions add major benefits to manufacturing businesses; so why do many SMEs sit on the fence and struggle by, running a manufacturing business with just a basic accounts package, the odd spreadsheet or two and do the rest in the traditional manual 'knife & fork' mode?

There are five main issues that deter SMEs from real business improvement:

- 1) Will I put more effort into the system than I get out of it?
- 2) I don't have the staff for complex systems
- 3) I can't afford all that time away from my factory on system training
- 4) These systems take too long to get up and running
- 5) It's so expensive – I haven't got the capital budget

The founders of Rent-IT Systems had many years experience in traditional modular-type systems. We looked hard at the day-to-day business activities that all manufacturers need to perform and threw away the contrived divisions of a 'modular system' design approach in favour of business processes and functions. Many systems are often abandoned because they require more effort than the benefits justify.

To tackle issues (1) and (2) we emphasised simplicity and speed of processing: focusing on the core processes required by most manufacturers and not diluting our efforts by developing 'fringe' software capabilities that only a few would require. For the SME, having effective control 'from quotation to sales invoice' is the core of the primary functions and activities.

The second stage was to devise a series of short, effective implementation services to address issues (3) and (4). The system was made to be intuitive through extensive use of 'wizards', so user training could be reduced from the norm of 'one day of training per module'.

This allowed us to focus on what the customer really needs to know to effectively use the whole system; we devised a 3-day course for the user, a 1-day system administration course and a comprehensive implementation project planning service – just five

service days. This means the user gets the tools and know-how to be self-sufficient and avoids high service and running costs. The results so far, have been encouraging with an average support call rate of less than one call per customer per month.

The final stage of the new concept was to address issue (5), and make the system financially accessible for the SME. Rental is only part of the answer, because without the true systems ease of use and the effective implementation approach, we wouldn't have achieved the complete concept. The software and the implementation methods are designed to be straightforward, simple and easy; therefore the rental element of the new concept needed to follow suit.

Whilst rental negates the large capital outlay, when it comes to systems, we wanted to provide a true rental, without any finance agreements, contracts, minimum rental or termination periods. In short, a no-commitment rental policy was created which is straightforward, simple and easy. A rental arrangement with no tie-in on a month-to-month arrangement, whereby customers can increase or reduce their user-licence at will, provides flexibility in times of uncertainty.

Guy Amoroso is managing director of Rent IT Systems

Second time lucky

Advanced Specialised Production Ltd (ASPL) is a subcontract machinist based in Southampton. It decided in 1999 to invest in a manufacturing software system, but found it so complex that it was dropped within three months of installation - a costly exercise at £12k plus training. Projects manager Steve Powney reflects: 'We reverted back to our DOS-based Pegasus costing system but always felt that we still needed to expand to a full manufacturing system in the future.'

So Powney attended a Rent-IT workshop. 'It did everything we needed without a fuss - you only enter the information you need, and you build up the database structure as you go. For example, if you try to place a purchase order for a supplier that is not in the system the "Data-Builder" will prompt you to enter the supplier on-the-fly. This information is then instantly accessible wherever it is needed.'

The contract to install the system was signed on 21st October 2002, with implementation scheduled a week later. This covered installation of the SQL Server, setting up of the main terminal (which allowed all others to be set up remotely) and building in each part of the system stage by stage. The first area to go live was purchasing, with existing customer and

suppliers' records together with parts and stock information being imported. Powney comments on Rent-IT's ease of use:

'There's always a wizard to guide you, to simplify the process and reduce the need for excessive training.' Training was performed for 8 staff over 3 sessions; each received 3 days and administrators received an additional day's training.

Data is captured on the shopfloor to give precise information on orders and machine workloads. Barcodes are used to record information such as operator, work centre being used, works order logged on/off etc. 'At a touch of a button it gives us a minute-by-minute view of what every machine is doing at any one time, and the position of any order - when customers call we immediately know exactly what stage a job is at'. Previously the entire order process, from quotation to invoice was paper-based. Rent-IT has replaced this electronically, generating paper only when required.

'In our business, speed is a major issue. We can get an order from a Formula 1 company with a very quick turnaround requirement that not only can we easily accommodate into our production schedule but can accurately price and track. Rent-IT allows us to remain competitive and keep control of our business.'



Data is captured on the shopfloor at ASPL using Rent IT, to give precise information on orders and machine workloads

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