

Integrated software keeps shop on track

Evaluating both the whole business and individual projects ensures accurate estimates and a better bottom line for busy commercial cabinet shop

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Although the business was founded more than 70 years ago, Atlanta Cabinet Shop Inc. in Buford, Ga., takes full advantage of 21st century computer technology to compete in the tough business of commercial cabinetry.

But the focus of that computer technology is more on driving the business side of this busy shop. Only recently has computer technology been applied to the production machinery in the operation. Owner Don Clements has used computer software to track job costs, automate and fine-tune estimates, and now



Atlanta Cabinet Shop production manager Terry Michaels has a computer terminal on the shop floor to link him to the office network. He engineers projects using AutoCAD and Microvellum software, while owner Don Clements tracks and estimates jobs using Tradesoft ProjectPAK and ShopPAK software.

he's added an integrated system that pulls information from all the jobs together in one place to help him track his business as a whole.

"It's automating your front office," he says. "Life's a lot simpler."

Command center

The emphasis on keeping track of business is apparent as soon as you walk into the front office of Atlanta Cabinet Shop. There is no maze of cubicle offices or fancy executive suite. Instead you enter a long open room with built-in desks, all against a windowed wall facing the shop. It's much like the bridge of a big battleship or ocean liner. From his "captain's seat" (an unassuming office chair), Clements has a clear view of his whole operation, from assembly to reception desk and out

to shipping. He characterizes it as a command center.

But the real view of the business that Clements relies on most is what he sees on his computer screen, because sometimes just eye-balling the work in progress doesn't give him the whole picture. Clements has been using Tradesoft's ProjectPAK software since 1996 to estimate his jobs. The program estimates job costs in fine detail.

"Everything that goes through the shop is first estimated with ProjectPAK," says Clements. "Stock and custom products all have corresponding ProjectPAK assemblies." An assembly contains the estimated material and labor needed to produce an item of the job.

Tweaking assembly costs is an

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Shop Snapshot

Company: Atlanta Cabinet Shop Inc.

Location: Buford, Ga.

Founded: 1928

Proprietor: Don Clements

Primary products: Commercial cabinetry

Employees: 7

Annual sales: \$750,000 to \$1.1 million

Shop size: 15,000 square feet

Key equipment: Brandt KD68 edge-bander, Cut-Rite software, Holzma beam saw, Microvellum software, SCM sliding table saw, Tradesoft ProjectPAK and ShopPAK software.

Integrated software



Between 80 and 90 percent of the work done at Atlanta Cabinet Shop is cut on this Holzma beam saw. Cut parts are put on the nearby roller conveyor that feeds them to the Brandt KD68 edgebander.



ongoing process, but it is easy to keep them up to date because Clements has built his assemblies using ProjectPAK library items. If a

material or labor price changes, he changes it in the library and all of the assemblies that reference that library item are automatically updat-

ed. "It's absolutely ingenious," says Clements of the system.

Easy estimates

When it comes time to do an estimate for a job, Clements simply gathers all the assemblies required by the job and copies them into a new estimate. If an assembly doesn't exist, he creates one by changing an existing assembly and saving it with a new name. Since he has built his assemblies parameterically, the program automatically calculates cost from the numbers he plugs in for height, depth, width, waste, etc.

The program creates an itemized price list that Clements says makes it easy to talk to clients about job costs. If there are any questions from the client about how much something costs, the itemized breakdowns make that easy to explain, says Clements.

"I'm for showing more information rather than less to the customer," he says. "It shows that I have a method here, and that it's consistent." But that said, he cautions, "The way you present a job to a customer is not



Work at Atlanta Cabinet Shop is designed to flow in a U-shaped fashion from the beam saw to edgebander and laminating, through assembly and finally back out to the shipping dock.



Don Clements' desk at Atlanta Cabinet Shop in Buford, Ga., is open to the rest of his front office and offers expansive views of the shop floor. He terms it a command center that allows him to see what's going on in the shop without interfering with the work.

necessarily the way you present it to the shop or to a shipper.”

To get his initial price points, Clements basically followed Architectural Woodwork Institute guidelines, and then fine-tuned them for his individual needs and markets. He uses a feature in ProjectPAK called work-groups to further break down projects into types of jobs for better tracking and analysis.

“I think a lot of shops are not aware there is a better way to estimate,” says Clements. “What CNC has done for the shop, this does for the office.”

From project to whole shop

Although Clements loved how ProjectPAK helped automate his estimating process, he recognized that something else was needed to give a more complete picture of the operation.

As a beta tester he helped in the development of Tradesoft’s new ShopPAK software that integrates with ProjectPAK to provide that wider view he was looking for.

While ProjectPAK tracks individual project data, ShopPAK tracks the whole shop, integrating all of the information from ProjectPAK and offering new opportunities.

“ShopPAK automatically converts the estimate into a job, complete with job items, work orders, purchase orders, and budget estimates of labor and material,” Clements says. “Besides job tracking and job costing, we use it for purchasing, inventory management, shipping and receiving.”

All the information to track labor comes from time sheets filled out by the five employees on the shop floor. That information is used to cost every job and keep the system up to date.

Electronic office

Although paper and pencil may have been fine for 1928 when Atlanta Cabinet Shop was started, Clements relies on the computer for virtually everything that goes on in



Screws and staples are the primary assembly devices for the work Atlanta Cabinet Shop does. Here an employee assembles a counterfront for a restaurant chain.

his office. In addition to the ProjectPAK and ShopPAK software, the business uses MYOB accounting software and Microsoft Excel spreadsheet program. All work is calendared in the WinDates program so everyone has ready access to the schedule.

Design drawings and cutlists are developed with AutoCAD and Microvellum, then optimized in CutRite and downloaded directly to the Holzma beam saw for cutting.

Because the design programs are not linked to the estimating program, Clements is forced to do double entry of some job information. But he sees that as an advantage

rather than a detraction, because it provides checks and balances to make sure the information is correct. Clements does the bidding and estimating, while the production manager, Terry Michaels, does the engineering. Michaels can access the computer system from a terminal on the shop floor as well as in the office.

Despite all of the emphasis on computers and software in the front office, Atlanta Cabinet Shop has been slower to automate the production side of the operation. Clements puts his reasoning quite succinctly. “What good is all the CNC equip-

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Thinking through a machinery purchase

When Atlanta Cabinet Shop owner Don Clements started to explore entering the world of automated machinery, he took a bit different approach in his analysis than many shops do. For one thing, he doesn’t see automation as a solution to a problem of low profits.

“If you can’t make money with the equipment you already have, odds are you can’t make money with more equipment,” he says.

When he recently considered going from two sliding-table saws to a beam saw, he looked at potential labor savings and efficiency issues, but that wasn’t the whole story. “I

can’t tell you mathematically that it’s justified,” he says of the purchase. But he suggests there are intangible areas such as safety, accuracy, quality of cut, interfacing with the office computer network and lower employee fatigue issues that all add value to the purchase.

And one machine purchase may be required for or lead logically to another purchase. For example, Clements believes he needed to first get the beam saw before he could consider getting full value out of the purchase of a CNC point-to-point machining center. That’s a purchase he’s considering for the future.

Integrated software



This row of bank teller stations awaits its turn to be shipped and installed. Behind the teller stations, the windows of the open front office "command center" can be seen.



Atlanta Cabinet Shop did all the casework, counters and cabinets for this Arby's restaurant.



Fixtures, counters and cabinets for fast food facilities like this Japanese restaurant are the kinds of projects Atlanta Cabinet Shop specializes in.

ment in the world without an accurate estimate?"

But now Clements is moving to update his machinery and production processes. He used to rely on sliding-table saws to cut sheet goods, and he still has an SCM slider that is used for specialty cuts. However, the bulk of cutting is now done on a Holzma CNC beam saw.

From there, parts go to a roller conveyor that feeds into a Brandt KD68 edgebander. Laminate is applied in a large work area in the center of the shop floor, where a forest of 55-gallon drums serve as efficient work stands for laminating and edge finishing.

Construction remains the screws and staples that the shop has found to be efficient and flexible for many years. Clements says the added precision achieved with the beam saw leads him to look in the direction of construction boring and the addition of a point-to-point CNC

machining center not too far down the road.

Subcontracting installations

Once the work is completed in the shop, it is shipped to the job site for installation by a subcontractor. The business doesn't own a truck and relies on a private hauler to ship the finished goods. Several factors contribute to the decision to leave installation and shipping to others.

Clements doesn't think he has enough work to keep a good installation crew busy full time, and he doesn't want to shift people from the shop to job sites. Likewise, finding skilled installers in the area is a problem, he says.

Growing profitable work

But more importantly, Clements says the decision to contract shipping and installation services has more to do with cost control. "It's about fixing the cost," he says. "I can give the

job to (the contractor) and not worry about it." If he kept those tasks in house, he worries that costs would creep up and cut into profit margins.

By watching details like that, Clements can continue to build the business and be confident of profitability. He says, "I don't seem to get that occasional money loser

since incorporating the software tracking systems I now use, and estimates are very accurate."

"It's surprising how close we come," he says, referring to actual versus estimated costs. He takes that information and tries to "replicate jobs that make money." He looks at why a job was profitable and then "applies the same science" to other jobs.

But he also thinks the system has given him the confidence to turn down low-paying work and stick by his prices despite downward pressure from customers in his highly competitive market.

"You can't be the low price," he says bluntly. "There's no bottom." □

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