METAL & GLAZING

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DEVOTED EXCLUSIVELY TO THE ARCHITECTURAL GLASS INDUSTRY   VOLUME 43, ISSUE 10 OCTOBER 2008

The Official Publication of GANA

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A Texas Glass Company Goes Live

In This Case, ERP Software Leads to Automation Communication and Extra Capacity

by Rich Porayko

M3 Glass Technologies adopted ERP software to increase its information flow.

M3 Glass Technologies in Irving, Texas, started tempering in July 2005 and it didn't take long before it grew into new capabilities and new technologies.

"M3's first tempering furnace went online and we made the investment to temper our own glass for our own consumption, for our own installations (through sister company Mammen Glass and Mirror) and for our own sales," recalls Chris Mammen, president of the company. "We grew so quickly that we realized we needed to transition into a fabricator and not a glass and mirror company that we've been for 50 years. The first step was to have a new identity. We came up with M3 Glass Technologies."

The next step was to increase capacity and throughput through technology and automation. In early 2006, M3 went live with an enterprise resource planning (ERP) software package.

An ERP system is one single integrated information software system that serves the needs of the entire company, from sales to production to human resources to finance. Historically, these departments generally have their own systems that are unique and designed specifically for the ways that each department works. However, ERP can handle transactions, maintain records, provide real-time information and facilitate planning and control. ERP essentially is a standardized set of best practices for performing a variety of tasks.

What ERP Can Accomplish

To remain competitive, M3 Glass Technologies invested in this business management software.

"We were looking to put less paper out on the floor for one thing, and implement bar-coding," Mammen explains of the company's decision to invest in ERP. "We got to the point with all of our fabrication capabilities that there was a

> ❝ERP essentially is a standardized set of best practices for performing a variety of tasks, including purchasing, production and finance.❞

dozen copies of each work order circulating around that needed to be tracked manually through the plant. So we were looking to automate, reduce our paper usage, increase our information flow with feedback to the sales side so that our salespeople could check on order status and vice versa, so our scheduling people could look ahead for orders that haven't hit the plant floor yet."

In order to reduce paper usage, many

ERP systems are written to accommodate common forms of digital documentation such as AutoCad files, Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, PDFs, photographs and electronic scans of original paperwork. The system stores everything digitally, reducing the amount of paper a company consumes. Since ERP is designed to share information, the software simplifies the need to label and catalog digital documents. Such storage also allows the software to act as a document management system.

To help increase information flow, ERP systems are built to integrate the data and processes of all of the company's various departments into one single system that uses a unified database so that each department can more easily share information and communicate with each other and also store data for various functions found throughout the organization.

In addition, this type of software is able to provide feedback to the sales team by allowing sales staff to quickly and easily check customer order status, history, pricing, credit/A.P. information, tax status and energy surcharge rates, and provide them access to user-defined customer relationship management information. Advanced sales reporting is available, including sales forecasting by customer or product in dollars, square feet and weight, from some packages.

Some systems include customer relationship management tools, which allow users to take and share notes during conversations with customers complete with follow-up calendars and scheduled auto-e-mail reminders. They can also be setup for customer-specific instructions such as cutting tolerances or work/shipping instructions. Contemporary systems include marketing tools such as mass e-mailing and mass faxing.

Mammen sees integration with equipment as an added benefit, as it is one of the things that they are gradually adding. For example, M3 Glass Technologies is planning on utilizing an optimizer software that it expects to eliminate the bridge between the software and the equipment.

Taking Action

When M3 made the decision to integrate software, action was taken quickly.

"We left our previous software system
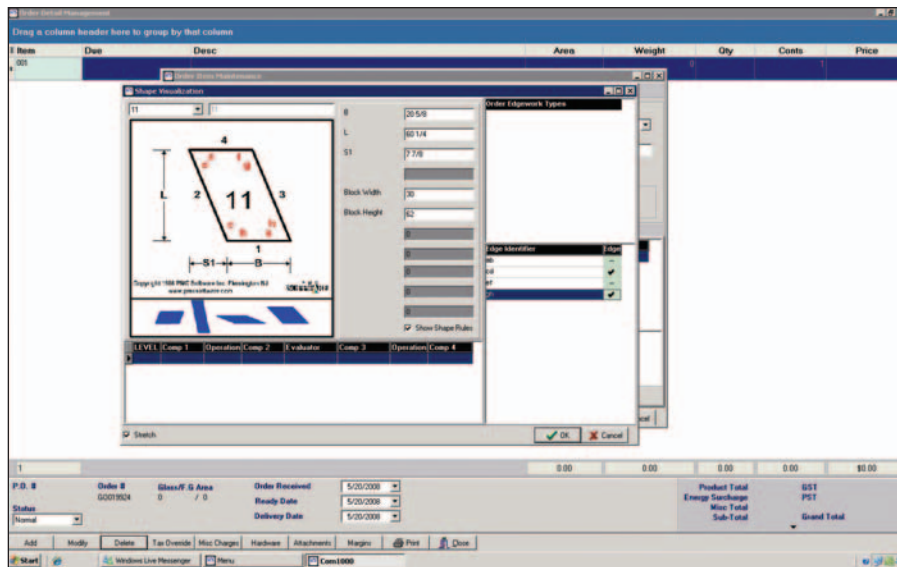
ERP software systems integrate information from a variety of departments to serve the needs of the entire company.

cold turkey," Mammen says. "Actually we were using Quickbooks® for our financial package under the old system so we just went into bridging [the new system] into Quickbooks®. That was a nice part of the implementation. We weren't changing our entire business. The finan-

cial side of our business stayed as a solid foundation with minimal changes so the only thing that changed was how we bridged into it. That made it a lot more doable. We didn't have to worry about

keeping the books straight and keeping the glass going through the plant."

Mammen explains that the software had the most dramatic effect on throughput. Extra capacity enabled M3 Glass to start laminating in April 2008. "Every piece of laminated has to be run as two lites through the plant. So now we have the capacity to do that. Our growth wouldn't have been possible without that change." Mammen adds, "We are bidding and doing a lot of laminated work, which opens up whole new markets. It drives stuff through the rest of our plant as well. The same thing we laminate is going to be polished or tempered or bent or DecoTherm® printed or fabricated or any combination of those items."

Mammen continues, "The software really has done what we were expecting it to do. We have found that it has a lot more capabilities than what we are able to implement in a short time so we are slowly adding functionality that is already available."

Managing Change

Mammen looked at several different software suppliers when he shopped for an ERP package. He looked at criteria such as how long the companies had been in the industry, price and the familiarity of companies with the glass industry.

When asked about his overall experience with the implementation, Mammen comments, "I've been part of several implementations over the years and compared to the other ones, I thought it went very smoothly. It wasn't without some problems, but it went very smoothly, comparatively speaking … I think the hardest part of any implementation is setting our own people's expectations on our end. I was doing that for months ahead of time, telling people that hadn't been through an implementation before, 'You're not going to come into work on Monday morning and turn it on and it works. It's not like buying a copy of Quicken® and you can just sit down and start using it. We're going to have to set it up to adapt it to our business, we're going to learn how it works and we need to customize it.' But I thought that because of the preparation of our mindset in advance … it really went off well."

Mammen can't stress "change management" enough. "Make sure your people are prepared well ahead of time. Most people don't like change—I do. For the people that don't like it, it is scary, it is intimidating and it's a big stress on top of any other stress they have going on. You just have to manage that and let calmer heads prevail. Don't get wound up and bent out of shape when someone says, 'Hey,
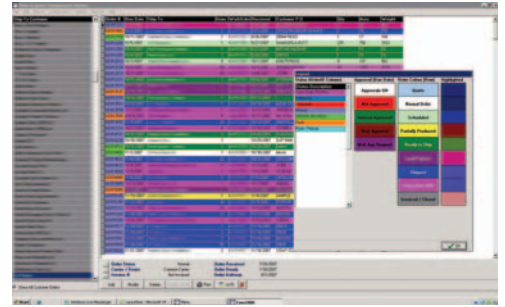
Mammen's new ERP software allowed it to increase throughput.

I entered this order and now's its gone.' 'Well, no, it's not gone, it's in there somewhere, let's think it through and find it, something got changed.' Someone would say a document wouldn't print and we'd look into it and find it printed down the hall at the other printer. Simple things. It's the little things that go wrong, the things that are going to go wrong anyway. Some people tend to see it through the lens of 'this is the new software' and that makes everything a bigger problem. And you ask the same people later if they would like to go back to what we were using before and they always say no." ■

the author

Rich Porayko is the sales and marketing director for Simplicity Computer Solutions (SCS) in Ajax, Ontario. SCS supplied M3 Glass Technologies with its ERP system. Mr. Porayko's opinions are solely his own and do not necessarily reflect the views of this magazine.