

Shaking off rigidity

Flexibility fosters expansion at service center that routinely performs multiple processes per order



BY GRETCHEN SALOIS

When Penn Stainless Products in Quakertown, Pennsylvania, found it had outgrown its current software platform, it sought out changes. “We looked at the new platform offerings from our provider at the time and it did not fit our needs,” says General Manager Dave Harris. “The software was too rigid. We were locked in a box and we found that in order to adjust to their software, we would

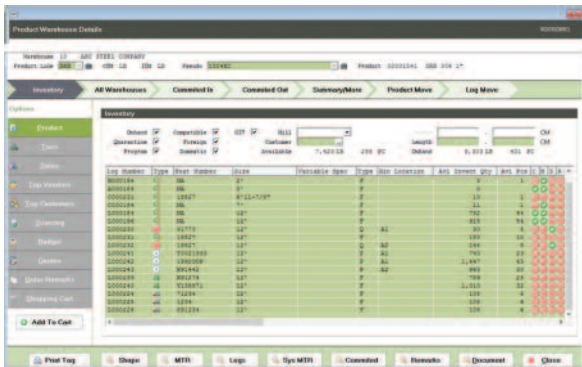
Penn Stainless Products needed software that could meet the needs of its full-line stainless steel distribution business.

have to move in a direction that wasn’t built for us.” The programming was more suited to a metals production facility rather than for a full-line stainless steel distributor, he says.

Instead of battling what Harris anticipated would become “tremendous implementation issues,” Penn Stainless

hired a consultant to review and sort out its best software options. “We started with 45 to 50 companies and weeded it down to half a dozen,” recalls Harris. 4GL was invited to come give a presentation. “Other systems we had looked at were so rigid you couldn’t get around anything,” Harris continues. “When 4GL did their demonstration, they showed us they could give us what we needed.”

Penn Stainless found that 4GL Solutions, Stouffville, Ontario, ensures the system configuration is carefully designed



SM3 software allows users to easily maneuver between processing jobs.

SM3 allows Penn Stainless to implement a successful workflow and tracking procedure, material management and inventory control, as well as sales tools.

to the customer or “back to our facility to finish or add an additional process.”

Maneuverability

Running multiple processes can make maneuvering between jobs exceedingly difficult without the right organization in place. “Handling a long product compared to a plate or sheet product are two completely different processes that we [perform] each day,” Harris says. “Instead of us having to think about how we might adjust our processes to fit the software, 4GL makes jumping between processes easy to manage. They’ve adapted to us, not the other way around—so we were able to switch over to the new platform without missing a beat.”

In other words, 4GL’s SM3 software provides the adaptability required by processing shops as well as the flexibility to accommodate the needs of each metal center client. “There is a tremendous amount of functionality in the system,” says 4GL Solutions President George Walton. “And our implementers will configure the system according to our customers’ business requirements.”

Some software users have “unique requirements that are very important to their business,” Walton says. “It’s our job to help them run their business how they want to and not how they are forced to due to software limitations.”

Management staff and implementers at 4GL have years of experience in the metals industry. “When we’re talking to customers about functionality and procedures,” Walton says, that industry experience has value. “We already know what a grade, finish, temper, etc., is—you don’t have to teach us metals. It

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GEORGE WALTON, 4GL SOLUTIONS



to meet the needs of individual clients. Steel Manager III (SM3) allowed the service center to improve how it ran its processing sequences.

Flexibility is necessary because Penn operates a whole gamut of metal shaping equipment. For plate alone, there is sawing, plasma and waterjet cutting. The company levels sheet and plate leveling, and cuts to length round and square bars, channels, beams, pipe and tubing. It carries over 25 grades of stainless plate up to 6 inches thick, and round bar up to 26

4GL Solutions provided the necessary flexibility for Penn Stainless to complete its multiple cutting operations spanning a wide range of products.

inches in diameter.

“We will do multiple [value-added] processes to materials,” Harris says. For example, Penn will cut plate on one of its five waterjet cutting tables, then ship the piece to an outside processor for additional work, followed by either shipping directly

makes the process more focused and streamlined.”

Streamlining results

4GL software helped Penn Stainless Products to implement a successful work-flow and tracking procedure, provided accurate and beneficial material management, sales tools and precise inventory control.

“The process is seamless and quick and we can see where we are during a job every step of the way,” Harris says. “The inventory module in particular has been a huge boost to sales as we are dealing with such a diverse universe of products and grades of stainless.”

The reason that inventory tracking is a “huge” benefit for sales is because employees “can quote jobs knowing what we have on hand,” Harris continues. Product specific settings have come in handy too. For example, substitutions can be crucial should an emergency job come along. “Our software knows that if we quote a job for stainless [grade] 304 and turns out we

won’t have it for the order, we have built in a [grade] 316 substitution ability. But if it’s 316, our software knows we can’t substitute 304.” He says Penn and 4GL “worked out all the compatibilities” during initial setup of SM3.

Penn’s old system made it possible to force a substitution that could lead to errors. “It would be a mess,” Harris says. SM3 has incorporated safeguards to control shipment accuracy as well as detailed inventory information. SM3 provides information such as compatible stock, pre-received items, available versus on-hand inventory, country of origin and mill test report management in real time. “Our sales guys can see what’s ready to be used and whether it will fit the job, which really helps,” Harris adds.

Country of origin

More and more Penn customers are insisting on domestic material. “Some people want ‘Made in the USA’ or specifically request that material not be from

somewhere, say China—and we’re able to accommodate those requests with product codes built for each item and quick access to material test reports from the [producing] mills.”

To obtain additional functionality and automation, 4GL Solutions has integrated such industry tools as Kasto materials storage and retrieval systems, and Pro-Nest plate-cutting software, among other efforts.

It’s the ability to move back and forth and mold the product to each customer’s needs that keep them happy. “Non-metal specific software can’t handle everything our customers need to do. We can,” says Walton. ■

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