

ShopTalk delivers new tool for manufacturers

Touch-screen program improves efficiency on shop floor

BY ELIZABETH GELDERMANN, of SBT

As new software solutions and technology upgrades filter into the manufacturing industry, system developers tend to focus on back-office personnel and machines, said Bob Lazlo, Director of Sales and Marketing for Brookfield-based Guardian Business Solutions Inc. (GBSI).

Systems including Six Sigma applications, radio frequency identification (RFID) and manufacturing execution systems (MES) improve machine efficiency and cut operating costs by eliminating the

probability of human error.

However, system developers have overlooked those working on the shop floor and underestimated their need for efficiency. Workers need to keep track of

orders, receive changes in materials and be able to contact a back-office worker, a supervisor or an engineer without wasting time.

In an environment where communication is key, a software solution that provides the transfer of updated information is equally important.

Bridget Lazlo, President and partner, and James "Miff" Keepers, Executive Vice President and partner of GBSI, launched ShopTalk, software geared toward the shop floor, in 2001 to aid workers and improve productivity.

"MES can be expensive, difficult to integrate and focuses on integrating areas on the floor more than integrating the workers," Bob Lazlo said. "ShopTalk is a streamlined version of an MES that is easier to integrate, affordable for small and mid-sized companies and is geared toward the workers on the shop floor."

With ShopTalk, workers can access the company's database through buttons on a touch screen. ShopTalk connects with files linked from company departments and pulls information for shop floor workers from any format, from a Microsoft Word or Excel file to computer aided drafting (CAD) files and MPEG files, which hold moving pictures.

When a worker needs to look at an engineer's diagram, check for quality control, packing or a paint color, it is all available through ShopTalk.

Typically, in facilities that have not implemented ShopTalk, administrators have to collect pieces of information, laminate each page to prevent dirt and liquids from ruining them and put them together in a manual that stays on the shop floor as a resource, Bridget said.



Worker using ShopTalk in a facility.

ON THE MOVE Bob Lazlo, Director of Sales and Marketing, wears the ShopTalk Mobile product.

ShopTalk cont.

GBSI developed ShopTalk after researching the major benefits that MES could bring to large, mid-sized and small companies, Bob said. ShopTalk is a software solution that integrates with any program the manufacturer uses, including computer aided drafting (CAD) and administrative programs.

Workers, computer proficient or not, can use the system to pull needed information, including design notes, blueprints, warnings, changes and shipments, Bridget Lazlo said.

"ShopTalk was designed to be used quickly, which is a very important principle. We have seen what happens when things get too complicated," Bob said. "If we are going to compete with companies without labor laws and environmental standards overseas, we have to be more efficient. Workers need to get on ShopTalk, get the information and get off."

ShopTalk has three purposes, Bob said. It serves as an information station, a data collection station and a communication station.

The system consists of ShopTalk software, monitors with touch screens and accessories, including microphones and carts for mobility. The program ranges in price from \$1,800 to \$2,500 per station. Each station includes software, hardware and optional accessories.

The touch screen can be mounted on a cart with a shelf to place the screen and a shelf for the battery. A ShopTalk system can be unplugged and moved to accommodate a worker who needs to go to his or her station.

ShopTalk Mobile is another product from GBSI that puts the entire ShopTalk system on a vest for mobile workers who are picking, scanning or fixing machines and need product information at their fingertips. ShopTalk Mobile ranges in price

from \$3,500 to \$4,800 per vest and includes software and optional accessories.

The touch screen makes the system easy to use while wearing gloves and allows ShopTalk to be used effectively without the nuisance of a keyboard. GBSI uses voice technology to confirm a command, allowing the user to speak with other employees or to announce a change in schedule or a shortage of materials, Bridget said.

"It was very important that the design was visual in that workers had to be able to understand without significant training," Bridget said. "On the shop floor, there can be language barriers or workers with reading disabilities. A lot of workers are not computer people."

ShopTalk was intentionally created to be easy to read and easy to use. The program can talk a user through a process, if needed. Users can choose the text-to-speech option, where the computer repeats what the user writes.

"Whatever the users write can be activated," Bob said. "By reading, seeing and hearing the protocol, workers can comprehend faster, and their retention is longer."

The administrative tool only requires the administrator to link a file with the ShopTalk program. No maintenance is required, as long as there is logic to where the administrator stores files. An administrator can be trained to use ShopTalk in 15 minutes, Bridget said.

"We had to get away from the conven-



Lazlo



Keepers

tional Microsoft screen that is designed for a mouse or a keyboard," Bob said. "A person's eye is intuitively drawn to the prompts, and the colors highlight the next step or alert a user when new information is available."

ShopTalk easily integrates with structured query language (SQL), the programming language that sends queries to databases, and open database connectivity (ODBC), a method of sharing data between databases and other programs.

GBSI is now integrating ShopTalk with a company's enterprise resource planning (ERP) software, which correlates information needed for customer orders, and with labor systems, where workers can clock in and out through ShopTalk.

ShopTalk eliminates the need for labor intensive manual updates and ensures proficiency on the shop floor, the Lazlos said.

When workers use the touch screen to retrieve information about a product, ShopTalk connects directly with a file on the company's database through a linking system. The file a worker retrieves is the same file that an engineer saved on his or her computer, which makes ShopTalk effortless to update and eliminates mistakes caused by a miscommunication.

Bridget has more than 25 years of experience in the manufacturing industry and founded GBSI with Keepers after working as a software developer and implementer for manufacturing and distribution companies.

"When workers are as productive as possible, there are fewer chances for errors," Bridget said.

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