HOW DIGITAL BUSINESS PROCESSES ENGINEERED A GREAT RESULT FOR FENTON PRECISION ENGINEERING

The introduction of digital systems has boosted efficiency and productivity at Fenton Precision Engineering. It also ensures it gets paid for all the work that it actually does.

The Tipperary company provides light engineering services for multinationals and SMEs throughout the Munster region. It was set up in 2010 by owner Paddy Fenton, after having worked in the industry for a number of years. "When I started out I had very little in the way of digital equipment, bar my CNC machine, which is a computer," explains Fenton.

In 2021 his Local Enterprise Office introduced him to a digital mentor who showed him how digital technology could help his business. "The result was the complete transformation of our jobs system," he says.

He started by looking at the systems he already had in place to track quotes, all of which were paper based. Job hours were written into notebooks by staff members. When jobs were completed, Fenton tabulated the hours of work involved for billing.

Analysing hours in this way was a lengthy process which Fenton undertook himself, often at night. Because it depended on staff recording hours accurately by hand, errors could arise.

If, for example, a team member delayed logging the details for a job done, they might forget parts of it, meaning some elements of the job, or materials used, would be missed.

With the help of his digital mentor Fenton introduced a cloud based system that enabled the team to update quotes as they went, from any location and any mobile device. They simply select a job on their mobile phone app, add in their hours, and any materials used.

SMOOTHER SYSTEMS

Previously, every evening I'd have to check the guys had their jobs cards done because it was just too easy to forget. That was money lost to the business, simply because it wasn't recorded properly. Now I can see at a glance if the guys have added their hours or not," he says. Fenton can also use the system to track billable hours versus non billable hours, an invaluable tool to improve both billing accuracy and job efficiency.

The success of the job hours tracker encouraged him to introduce a web-based purchase order system. Prior to it, orders to suppliers were placed by phone, with stock sheets updated manually when goods were received. Now orders are now placed via mobile app, with all the raw materials the firm uses accessible in a drop-down menu.

When a purchase order is completed, the system automatically emails the supplier and updates the goods-inward sheet. Again the system allows the team to place orders anytime, anywhere, and provides data to support accurate goods-in checks.

SWIFTER INVOICING

The new systems have helped to speed up invoicing too. With the digital job card team members select the customer from a drop-down menu on their mobile app and tick a box to say what materials were used, if any.

A comment section allows a description of the work done. "If, for example, a job took six hours when it was supposed to take four, they record the reason. We can then process the jobs card for invoicing. It does all these steps for us with no reams of paper anymore," he says.

The web-based purchase order system has brought additional benefits too, such as improved estimating ability. "If a job comes in I can look and see immediately what a similar job cost. I'm able to compare more easily and I'm getting better at quoting for jobs as a result," he explains. That matters. "Accurate estimating is critically important because it can go horribly wrong," he says.

LABOUR SAVING

Now he's keen to continue his digital journey, with a new accounting software package that can take data directly from his digital jobs system. "That will speed things up and I'm hoping it will be labour saving too, enabling me to do the invoicing myself," he says.

Digitising your business processes can seem daunting but is worth it, he feels. "I'm enjoying the new system because it gives

> # "I'M ENJOYING THE NEW SYSTEM BECAUSE IT GIVES ME A CLEARER EYE ON THINGS".

me a clearer eye on things. For example, at any one stage we could have 13 open jobs for one customer alone, and each of those has a separate job card. Before I'd have to go through each of those 13 different jobs cards, then check materials and check clock cards. Now I can have the job sheets, the invoices and the hours sheets all open in front of me on screen. I can see who worked on what and used which materials," he explains.

It has made his business more resilient too. "If I have a dip in billable hours one week I know to remedy that next week, because it's all there for me on my phone and laptop to see," he says.

It has speeded up payment too. "The quicker invoices get out, the quicker I get paid, which helps cashflow," says Fenton. "Getting the paperwork out of the way frees me up too. In every respect, digitisation has been a game changer."

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