Running Down the Road of Success With Ferguson’s Jim Blazek

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Running a marathon is not for the weak-spirited. It takes endurance, strength and training. When I visited the Front Royal Distribution Center (DC) of worldwide industrial supplier Ferguson, Jim Blazek, the facility manager there was set to run his first marathon…in between running the 644,000-ft. distribution center, one of, if not the largest of, Ferguson’s DCs.

“I love this company,” he says smiling. “There’s always a challenge. This is a company where you’re given enough latitude to go out and find what the challenges are and start working on them before you’re told what to do.”

It’s 10 am and he’s already been up for 5 hours. Lean, like a runner, Blazek’s day begins at 5 am. He runs 10 miles at least two of the four times he works out during the week. “I love it. I really get into it. It clears my mind,” he says.

With this attitude, he gets into work by 7:30 am and has his first diet Pepsi. Let the distribution begin.

10 years ago: The biggest challenge

Blazek began his career at Ferguson 10 years ago. He started at the company’s American headquarters in Newport News, VA, as a logistics analyst, planning the distribution centers he now runs. “Logistics just fits my personality,” he says. The planning, working with people, and the ability to get out and not just be tied to a

desk is what I do best."

Ten years ago, automation and warehouse management software was cutting edge, and it was Blazek's, and Ferguson's biggest challenge to implement. They chose Provia's Viaware software, which had its first applications in grocery picking. This software determines what and how much can go on a pallet. And on a smaller level, what kind of packaging to use. For example, if there are five items, it determines the best sized box. "This was a huge project for us to get the software off the ground," remembers Blazek. "It was new to the vendors, also, who had to provide the length, width and height of every product line they were sending, and we had to go out and measure and weigh the majority of what was being stocked." The first year or two were the toughest. "It was so difficult, because the warehouse management system was not setup for the wholesaling industry. It was setup for consumer goods. We had to create a standard operating challenge. That was a huge challenge," says Blazek.

But it paid off. The amount of dunnage, repacking and overall volumetrics were reduced. Revenue grew, and the rest is history. Blazek was asked to manage the McGregor, Texas DC. It was rough for about 6 months, he says, but once the SOP was worked out, it became on of Ferguson's most productive facilities. In 1998, Blazek was offered Ferguson premier DC, the biggest and best: the Front Royal, Virginia DC.

Double the Volume

Until Front Royal, Ferguson's largest facility measured only about 25-30,000 square ft. Built in 1998, the Front Royal DC measures 644,000 square feet, and the pipe building behind it, 110,000 square feet. Product started shipping in 1999. Front Royal provides product to the branches and customers all the way through the northeast through New England, down through part of North Carolina. They also serve Puerto Rico. The DC has recently partnered with a branch of its parent company, Wollesley Canada to provide product to them.

The product mix at the Front Royal DC trades in 6 different markets: including plumbing, PVF, mechanical, industrial, appliances, and HVAC. This DC also bags copper on site. In the pipe yard, employees do end finishing for pipes: cutting the pipe to length and putting the weld bevel back. They do weld grooving, cut grooving, and thread pipe up through 12 in.

Front Royal Distribution Center (DC) floor

The facility runs three shifts, seven days a week, closing only 17 hours per week. Daily a staff of 400 people move:
2000 parcel packages per day
2500 on Mondays
350-400 LTL freight shipments

And that's only on the first shift. The second and third shifts are all about replenishment:
30-35 trail loads are moved every night
10-11,000 of a total of 15,000 picks per night
30,000 trail loads of product are received every day

"I really enjoy the amount of activity that goes on here," says Blazek. Surprisingly he attributes the success of the DC, however, not to the volume, but to the customer service. He says its his job to make sure that the 400 employees there understand why Ferguson built ¾ million square feet in Front Royal. "Ferguson," he says, "provides better service: the right product at the right time."

According to Blazek, there are two types of DCs. Some distribution centers' reason for being is to be extremely efficient. They do the same types of business, the same type of order, such as replenishment orders to the same stores all three shifts seven days a week. "It's all about loading stuff into the trailer and it goes out to the store. It's more of a push system," he says.

Front Royal Distribution Center voice picking system

Then there's Ferguson. "We are more of a service center," Blazek explains. "For us it's all about servicing the branch, what their customer needs. We provide a lot of extra services that you wouldn't associate with a DC."

Blazek quickly provides an example: "If a customer is doing a job and they want that product broken into 23 different sites, we will pick it in 23 different groups, put

it in 23 different boxes, mark it 23 times to get it to 23 locations, if need be."

A walk in the DC

Around 11 am, or so we take a walk through the DC. Blazek greets almost all of his employees by name: A new shift is clocking in. Hey, Roy; *hola*, Margarita. "She is bent on teaching me Spanish," says Blazek. "She won't speak to me in English. We do have a significant percentage of Hispanic associates here. Some of our managers are bilingual and we have a bilingual program here at Ferguson. After clocking in, the employees gather in a circle for some stretching exercises.

In a nutshell the process at the DC starts with an order from a Ferguson salesperson who indicates what product is needed, when and where its needed and by what means it will be shipped and on what date. Fifteen minutes later, the label is printing out at the pick station. "And we're off and running, picking it, getting it merged together correctly on the dock, and loading it on the trailer," says Blazek. If a customer cancels more than 40 minutes after the order comes in, it's too late. It's already on the trailer."

Front Royal
Distribution Center
conveyor system

Conspicuously absent in this DC are two of the new technologies: RFID and robotics. Regarding RFID, explains Blazek: "We have looked into it and keeping our eye on it. We are happy with our RF systems and barcoding. I can see where it would be a big help, but I think Ferguson is going to wait it out."

Jim Blazek is not much of a dreamer. If you ask him what he would have done if he had not gone into logistics and become a DC facility manager, he says, "if there was something I would have done, I would have done it." He thinks for a minute…"well maybe a professional quarterback." He has learned something, he says when I spoke with him on the day of his tenth anniversary with Ferguson, just before he was to turn 40 and run his first marathon. "There is something I would have done differently, though. I would have made a decision faster to make a change. It's not to just make a fast decision for the sake of making it, but when you know what you should do, just put your plan together and do it. That's one of the lessons I've learned working here."

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