Computerizing Records Helps Plane Parts Production Take Off

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When Martha Paluch returned home to help run the family business her father had started with a partner in 1989, she experienced what might be referred to as “paper shock.” “I came back with expectations of changing times and going greener,” says Paluch, now a 25-year-old operations specialist at Phoenix Manufacturing, where her mother and brother also work.

“When I came back here to learn the family business, I had to ask why the aerospace industry has so much paperwork,” she says. “I was surprised to see what a burden it was to have to carry it. Just the sheer volume of it.” Phoenix Manufacturing employs 55 people at its 25,000-square-foot Enfield, CT facility, where it makes machined aircraft components for some of the aerospace industry’s leading names. Fabricating customized engine pieces for Hamilton Sustrand, Parker Hannifin and others, Phoenix’s work helps keep everything from military fighter jets to commercial luxury lines safely in the air.

Every time Phoenix ships something, there is a packet of paperwork. It could be a very small packet of just a few pages for a part pulled out of stock, or a hulking pile of hundreds of pages for parts that will eventually help carry thousands of people safely through the air. Record keeping starts with documentation for the raw materials and covers every detail at every stop during the manufacturing process, as well as blueprints or possibly even photographs. On any given week, Phoenix could file 100 or more packets of documents on the parts it makes.

What makes the record keeping requirements of the aerospace industry unique is the average document lifespan. Companies need to be able to trace the entire history of every part in their planes. So for most parts, Phoenix is required to ensure all the paperwork is available for at least 10 years. If the part is deemed “flight safety” – meaning the aircraft could crash if the part failed – the requirement is 40 years.

So after more than two decades in the business, Phoenix has filled more than a few filing cabinets. “Floor space,” laments Paluch, “is much better utilized for making parts than storing files.”

Facing rising costs in both facility space and employee time – Phoenix employees routinely need to access or retrieve paperwork – Martha was put in charge of moving Phoenix into the era of electronic filing.

After looking at several options, she went with the digital document storage software of Long Beach, CA-based Laserfiche. For the past six months, a college

student has been hired to scan new packets into the system, a total of roughly 500 pages per week.

That software allows the scanned document to be converted from electronic image into a computer text file, a process called optical character recognition, or OCR. That conversion allows Phoenix staff to then find any scanned document simply by typing into the Laserfiche search bar.

“When we need to find something we just type it in,” says Paluch. “Instead of digging through filing cabinets, the document you want pops right up on your desktop computer. It’s the Google of your own documents.”

Records can be printed or e-mailed directly from the system, and the company has easy control over who has access to what documents. The fast retrieval has improved customer service, and means one less distraction from what they really want to be doing.

The whole project – including installation and the purchase of scanners – came in for less than $10,000, and it’s gone smoothly enough that Paluch is looking forward to soon moving both accounts payable and human resources to Laserfiche. What they haven’t done yet, says Paluch, is start back scanning old documents or making the leap to shredding any of their paperwork. While she’s confident in the security of the system and its backups, she’s not sure Phoenix or its clients are ready to go completely paperless.

But what Paluch calls “baby steps toward modernization” is exactly how it should be done, says William Peyton of IP Systems, who was brought in to help with installation and support.

“You don’t want to decide all of a sudden, ‘We’re going to just shred all of our paper,’” says Peyton, explaining that the most immediate benefit he typically sees is less time and stress dedicated to that paper.

“What they do right away is stop filing the paper so meticulously,” he says. “They say, ‘We’re just going to stick it in a box and label it Stuff We Did This Week.’ They leave the meticulous record keeping to the new software.”

Similar steps have been taken already at Phoenix, says Paluch, with instant accessibility on Laserfiche allowing newer paper able to be put out of the way rather than kept close at hand.

The new system has dramatically reduced staff time spent filing and retrieving paperwork, while eliminating lost or missing files. “I really wish we could get rid of all of our paper,” she says. “But we can deal with being a little bit old school a little longer.”

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