

A Simple Request

Earlex is a leading manufacturer of power decorating and power cleaning appliances for both the professional and DIY markets. Based in Guildford, Surrey, the company was looking for a new finance and MRP system in 2007, and chose Exact Macola ES supplied by Lynq Ltd, Exact's partner in the UK.

Earlex's Factory Manager, Mark Maclachlan, was keen to find out how Lynq could add value to the new Macola system. His innocent request for a production scheduling tool with lots of features to replace their Excel-based process, led to Earlex using Visual Planner. Mark says:

"I made the request from a completely non-technical view point without having any idea of what was possible."

Peter Hayes and the Lynq team already had a planning tool in the wings. Visual Planner is part of Lynq's development of applications to work with Macola ES and Progression. The Earlex 'wish-list' was subsequently incorporated into the feature set.

"I wanted a tool to put production orders on a schedule and move them around. I thought I'd still have to cut and paste, but its not like that at all - I just have to drag-and-drop."

Spreadsheet Production Planning

With Earlex's previous finance and MRP systems, production scheduling was achieved using Excel spreadsheets. This involved data exports and imports, and extensive use of the copy and paste functions. When Earlex was busy, work on the Excel spreadsheet was a full time occupation for one person.

"It was a completely non-value added job."

Using Visual Planner

Earlex's Macola ES system went live at the beginning of August 2008. An early release of Visual Planner was installed shortly afterwards, replacing the spreadsheet scheduling process. Mark Maclachlan is gradually building a team of planners who are trained in using Visual Planner to schedule Earlex's manufacturing.



Other staff have view-only access, including the production team leaders, stock control and purchasing, and HR and admin staff. For all these people, Visual Planner has become an essential tool as they ensure the labor and material resources are available to meet the production schedules.

The reporting features in Visual Planner, such as the Trial Kitting function, are used extensively by Earlex. This is used to check the stores and components are in the right place when they are needed.

Mark is able to switch in seconds between different views of production: displaying three months is as easy as a single day. And Mark can see all 12 production lines at the same time when he needs to. Visual Planner allows him to see the peaks and troughs in production, and gives him the ability to smooth these by quickly changing resources and jobs for any of the work centers

Visual Planner enables Earlex to schedule production around meal and refreshment breaks, so the company can accurately forecast how long a job will take, and when it will be completed.

"When planning labor and parts, in one look I can immediately see an overview of how busy we are, if there are peaks or troughs during a week or during a month."



Getting Staff on Board

Initially, many of the Earlex staff were nervous of Visual Planner - like any new IT system, they didn't want to use it because they thought it would be incredibly complicated. Mark easily overcame their resistance:

"I'd sit them in front of a PC, and within five minutes have them scheduling or moving jobs around - it's so simple!"

Savings

Quantifying savings from a new system is often difficult, particularly when the effects are wide-ranging. It is not always a high priority when getting to grips with a new system. With the full-time spreadsheet planning task gone, Earlex is already making better use of its experienced production staff. Mark Maclachlan is sure the increased efficiency and accuracy of scheduling with Visual Planner has produced savings in his factory.

Getting Support and Asking for More

When asked about the support he gets from Lynq, Mark couldn't be more fulsome in his praise:

"Lynq really is amazing. I've never had a problem that wasn't sorted out in under seven

hours. Most of my problems are fixed there and then on the phone, no matter when I call."

Mark has been working with Lynq to refine Visual Planner and test new features.

"They think about every request and how it can be improved, so you don't just get your idea - you always get a better version of it."

Mark puts this down to Lynq's knowledge and experience of manufacturing and distribution. Lynq's development team keep asking questions until they have a full and complete understanding of the problem and the solution Earlex need.

Summing Up

When asked if he could ever envisage dropping Visual Planner and going back to their old scheduling system, Mark says:

"No way - not a chance. When I think back on it, I can't believe how we managed for so long like that."