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Small Quantity Metal Supplier Handles Growth with Easy Transition to Linux-based ERP Software

Philadelphia's Metal Stock enables higher sales growth with enhanced integrated ERP software and customer support.

With a growing number of manufacturers, machine shops, tool and dye makers, and contractors in the Delaware Valley-around Philadelphia requiring metal parts, business is good for Metal Stock, a small quantity metal supplier in the area.

Most metal vendors and distributors in the region responded to rising demand by consolidating their service centers and catering mostly to those buying large volumes. As a result, they left the many who require less by the wayside, facing longer delivery times and fewer choices.

In contrast, Metal Stock kept its faith in the smaller buyer who doesn't want much but still needs fast, efficient service and a wide selection. Consequently, its business has boomed. So much so, that in 2004 president Ken Bell ended his company's 10-year relationship with a franchiser and set the metal supplier on an independent course from which they have never looked back.

But by the fall of 2005, both Bell and his controller, Corinne Wightman, knew that to handle the company's swelling sales volume profitably they needed Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) software with more power and capacity to efficiently manage key business functions through one shared information database. So they called in their computer consultant and president of VS Info Systems, Harry Van Steenacker.

"They had been reliably using Vigilant Solutions for 10 years, but it was no longer big enough for them," says Van Steenacker. "Their sales and staff had grown so much they were constantly filling up their accounting files, having to purge them, and losing much of their sales history. That's when I helped them make the move to Oneir Solutions."

The new integrated ERP software had a familiar look and feel, yet provided sales order taking and invoicing for phone orders and over-the-counter sales, purchase order and inventory management for material requirements planning and customer relationship

management, as well as accounts receivable, accounts payable, and general ledger for financial control.

But the Oneir ERP software is downloaded to Van Steenacker with a customized, reliable yet nimble modern day Linux operating system ready to install on either a Windows or Linux server. This supplies not only a solid foundation for applications running on the server; but also makes it relatively easy to integrate new software with legacy applications.

"Linux is basically communications software that works beautifully with Windows Terminal Services, which allows Metal Stock to manage Oneir Solutions alongside all its Windows-based applications very comfortably," says Steenacker.

Metal Stock changed to the new ERP software over a weekend to keep business interruption to a minimum.

Van Steenacker co-coordinated the technical side of the transition while Wightman did the internal preparatory balancing and verified the correctness of the converted data afterwards.

"We shut down on Saturday and opened up again on Monday morning," recalls Wightman, a former chartered public accountant (CPA) who says she has witnessed many transitions from one accounting system to another in her career. "Everything was working. I was very impressed with the smoothness of the transition."

That migration also meant no more disruptive shutdowns for Wightman and Metal Stock.

"Before I had to remove paid invoices and purchase orders from our storage files," says Wightman. "With our growth, every three months or so I had to shut down in mid-afternoon because the system was full. With Oneir Solutions, I haven't had to shut down at all."

Nor has there been much of a time-robbing learning curve for Metal Stock staff.

"It is such an easy system to use because it's not complicated," says Wightman. "I needed no training or adjustment time, which surprised me because as a CPA I have gone through transitions with other companies that have been nightmares. I had set aside a lot of hours to train each of our six salesmen on the new system, but I ended up spending about half an hour doing it."

Wightman credits not only Harry Van Steenacker's careful planning for the ease of transition but also direct help from Oneir Solutions Inc. technical support staff ahead of time.

"They went through all our records with me to see if they were all ready for conversion," explains Wightman. "We spotted a few things so we fixed them. In previous transitions I've experienced, financial statements you've customized do not make it, so you have to put them all back into the system again. But with Oneir Solutions, everything came over, and I didn't have to re-customize anything."

Consultant Van Steenacker concludes, "You don't need customer support very often because they have such solid applications, but when you do need it, it's the best in the world."

For Ken Bell of Metal Stock, the smooth transition to the Linux-based ERP software means that he can get on quickly with growing the company. Already one of the biggest small-quantity metal suppliers in North America with more than 2,000 customers and several thousand items stocked in and sold from its 37,500 square-foot facility, Ken is thinking expansion.

"Oneir Solutions has opened up our bottom line," says Ken. "It's extremely reliable and can do sophisticated reporting. The sales analysis reports that Corinne generates from it, for example, show us what percentage of our sales is coming from which customers, and how that is changing from year to year. So we can make plans for growth based on some hard facts."

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