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Is workflow management the next step?

For those involved in the truss industry when we used calculators for detailing and drop hammer presses in production, we know how important it is to embrace and adapt to emerging technologies to remain competitive and profitable.

We've witnessed many exciting developments and now, as the market continues to mature, there is an increasing requirement to focus on the management of the entire business workflow. Although the term "workflow management" may be new to some, it's essentially formalising your business processes or the sequence of tasks that may currently be done using a handful of tools including whiteboards,

spreadsheets, databases and documented procedures. The goal of many businesses is to combine or at least reduce the number of separate tools to create an efficiently managed business system.

The benefits of using a managed workflow is a well-recognised business practice, along with the ability to continually refine and improve those processes as requirements change or are improved.

The first step before embarking on such a solution is to document your existing processes. Creating a flowchart [see example below left] is an excellent visual representation of the key processes and tasks within the business. Flowcharting

can help to determine the business tasks and rules so that they can be included in the design of the workflow.

An awareness of the objectives of a business is important before implementing a workflow as this may help to avoid the inclusion of inefficient steps or tasks that may not be needed. Determining the type of data required for entry or collection is also important so there's a sufficient level of detail available for reports and result monitoring.

The task of flow charting can be time-consuming and will usually involve some refinement during the process, but as with most adoptions of emerging technology, the benefits will usually justify the investment.

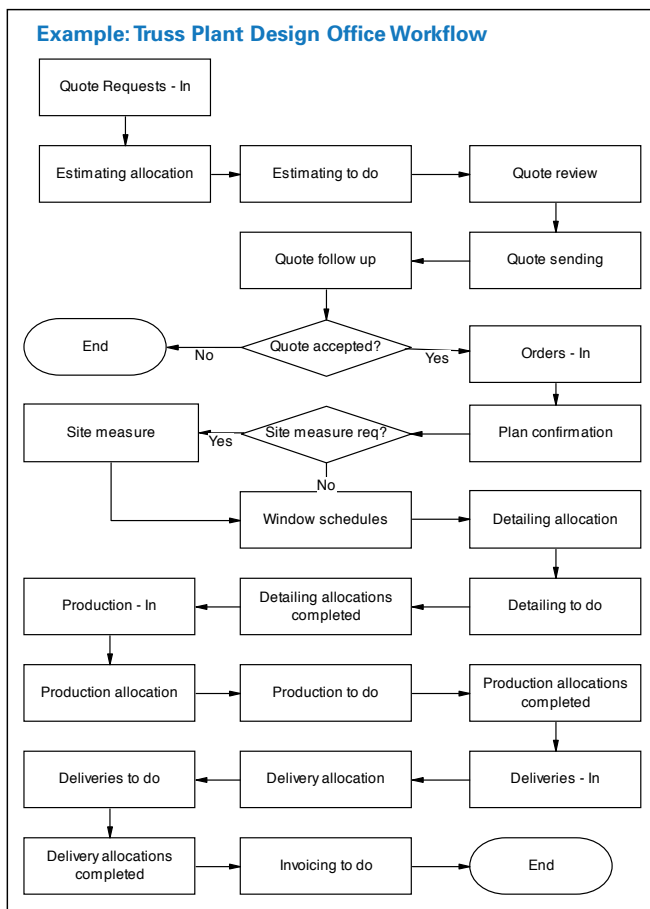
Benefits can be significant – efficiency gains, cost reductions and increased profitability. As well as helping business efficiencies and accountability, a properly designed workflow can also be a valuable tool when reacting to market fluctuations.

As the system settles into place, the reliance on key staff to ensure that tasks are allocated and completed on time is usually reduced due to the system's in-built business intelligence or logic. Results have shown that a managed workflow solution will often result in reduced labour and overhead costs as the management of tasks becomes streamlined and automated.

Managed workflows can be designed for transparency so the status of all the important tasks can be visible throughout the business. A well-designed implementation will usually result in reduced mistakes and improved accountability while quality of communication in the business will often improve as it can be shared and saved within the workflow. The ability to access the workflow remotely provides opportunities to manage effectively anytime from anywhere in real time.

It's for these reasons that business managers and owners are excited with this growing trend in the truss industry. Most truss plants have developed specific procedures and business rules that need to be followed so the ability to build these into a readily available, customisable, automated software solution is a logical progression. This has provided a welcome alternative to the expensive development and maintenance costs of in-house built solutions.

We've witnessed many developments that have contributed to the success of our industry, and workflow management is proving to be another major step in the ongoing evolution of our industry. If you haven't already, maybe it's time to consider what a workflow management system could do for your business? **T**



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