

Machfab Adapting to a digital landscape

A precision engineering firm has put technology at the heart of its growth plans, using Made Smarter support and advice.

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Birkenhead-based Machfab provides engineering solutions for customers in the food, pharmaceutical, Petro-chemical and the marine sectors.

When the company found it was losing ground to competitors on price, quality, speed and agility, they sought help from Made Smarter.

A digital strategy workshop identified a lack of connectivity across the whole factory, from office to shop floor, and out of date design and Computer Numerical Control (CNC) programming software which required too much manual intervention.

Phase one of its digital strategy introduced new office software and a cloud-based server, and upgraded its CRM and CAD/CNC solutions.

By improving connectivity and data flow within the company, processes are faster and production is leaner, allowing more capacity to grow.

Before Covid-19 Machfab was forecasting 10% year-on-year growth, but the impact of the pandemic means the business is now aiming to recover its position.

However, it is now committed to its digitisation journey and plans more investment.

Co-director Ian Hazlehurst said: “When we looked around at what our competition was doing, we had fallen behind. We had maintained a manual way of working for too long. There was little digitisation in our approach.

“From that very first call to Made Smarter it has been fantastic. The digital strategy workshop process and the impact from adopting new technology has given us a real

spring in our step and confidence in the future.”

The Challenge

Launched in 2004 Machfab has grown expertise in all aspects of CNC and conventional machining, steel fabrication and sheet metal services.

Led by Ian Hazlehurst, the business has grown to eight staff and a turnover of around £500,000, but workloads were starting to diminish.

“We could see our competition was taking work from us,” Ian explained. “Jobs that took us an hour were taking rivals minutes. We were also not very flexible and unable to take on any volume work because conventional machining was too manual, we were using older versions of CAD software, and there was no connectivity within the business.”

Machfab had attempted to speed up production by outsourcing programming to third party suppliers, but that ate into profits.

“Technology was evolving,” Ian said. “We had fallen behind. We had to catch up. We were too busy getting the job done on the equipment that we had to look up and see what was happening around the industry. We knew we had to adapt.”

The Solution

Made Smarter’s digital road mapping workshop helped Machfab develop a long-term strategy on how and when to adopt specific technologies.

Phase one was to focus on its basic IT infrastructure and office functions. This involved updating its operating system to Windows 10, upgrading its customer relationship management (CRM) software, and introducing a

cloud-based server. Another key investment was upgrading its 13-year-old old design software and manual CNC programming software to the latest digital CNC CAD/CAM software.

The Benefit

The solutions introduced a connectivity and data flow that Machfab had never experienced.

“Simply by linking up the computers and office functions across the business for the first time had a massive impact,” Ian said. “There was no more traipsing up and down the stairs for information from accounts. It was all there at my fingertips at the factory, from any computer, or remotely. Tasks that were time consuming and a bit of hassle became simple. It made us much leaner, faster and more efficient.”

More efficient and faster data flow gave Machfab a new level of traceability and enabled it to achieve ISO 9001 accreditation plus others.

The improved CRM software enabled the company to use customer and supplier intelligence to provide insight to the demand and plan future work schedules. It also provides accurate information for pricing to ensure profits are achieved against quotes for jobs.

With OneCNC CAD/CAM software the business brought programming back in-house and dramatically sped it up, which increased machine availability time and production capacity.

“This has been a game-changer for us,” Ian said. “Design and programming jobs that took us hours now take minutes. So much



manual intervention has been taken out, which means we will be able to increase production capacity and accept higher volume of work orders.” Digitalisation has afforded Ian and Machfab more time to develop new products and services, and focus their energies on growth as the business recovers from the impact of Covid-19 which closed operations for a while.

The Future

“Before the pandemic we were forecasting 10% growth,” Ian said. “That has become more about recovering our pre-Covid position, but it hasn’t deterred us from our commitment to phase two of our plans to digitalise the shop floor.”

Machfab is planning to invest further in three additional CNC

machines over the next few years, and digital calibration to improve the inspection process.

As a result, roles will be created and current staff upskilled.

“If phase one was about catching up with the industry phase two is about making ourselves more competitive,” Ian said. “The success of this project has opened doors to further innovation and diversification of our business and unlocked the company’s potential for growth. We have fully embraced the idea that technology is the key.”

