

## You **Can** Teach a Veteran Foreman New Skills

How a 78-year-old paving foreman went from never using a computer to being a whiz with construction field management software.



▲ **Ottaway (OJ) Jackson**, a 78-year-old foreman for the asphalt division of Aggregate Industries' Mid Atlantic Region, had never used software — or even turned on a computer — before successfully learning how to use field management software.

With a nearly 50-year successful construction career Jackson didn't initially embrace the idea of learning to use new software. But after being one of six "beta test" foremen, Jackson not only learned how to use a computer and the software, but he now says, "It's much better than paper. I wouldn't want to go back to paper for anything in the world."

**M**anagers at the Asphalt Division of Aggregate Industries' Mid Atlantic Region had a simple message for their field personnel who were about to undergo training on field-management software: "If OJ can do it, you can do it."

"OJ" is 78-year-old Ottaway Jackson, the popular, veteran paving foreman who supervises a crew of 10 Aggregate Industries personnel who pave roads and bridges in central and southern Maryland.

Jackson — fondly referred to simply as "OJ" by everyone at the Greenbelt, Md.-based Asphalt Division of Aggregate Industries — had never used a computer before he was asked to learn the new field-management software package the company installed in mid-2006. HeavyJob Field Management Software from construction software developer HCSS replaced the paper-and-pencil method that the Aggregate Industries Asphalt Division foremen and supervisors had always used to track employee time, production quantities, equipment usage, and other data in the field.

Jackson had never even turned on a computer, much less operated one. With a successful construction career dating back to 1960, Jackson couldn't see any reason why he should start using software and a laptop at an age when most of his contemporaries had been retired from the labor force for at least 10 years.

That, however, was exactly the point.

"We figured that, if we could get OJ to learn the

software, there would be no reason for anyone else not to learn it," says Kellie Campbell, Asphalt Division field support specialist who trained Jackson and other foremen and superintendents on HeavyJob. "OJ was one of six 'test foremen' whom I trained on the product. Once I got OJ on board, I was able to use him as an example for everyone. I said, 'If OJ can do it, you can do it.'"

### Initial reaction

Jackson did not initially embrace the idea of learning the software. But eventually, he realized that, if the company had faith in his capabilities, perhaps he should, too. Jackson is a well-liked, well-respected employee who's been working for the Asphalt Division since 2003. He'd spent the previous 30 years at Prince George's Contractors in Clinton, Md., before Aggregate Industries acquired the company.

"I didn't think much of the idea at first," Jackson recalls. "I told them that I would never learn the software. But they said, 'No, you can learn it. Just try it.'"

Campbell recalls how she and Aggregate Industries Asphalt Division Vice President Yvon Bergevin initially raised the idea with Jackson. "When we explained that we'd like him to be one of the first to use the new software, OJ started saying that he didn't think he could do it, and how you can't teach an old dog new tricks," she said.

But using Jackson as a "beta test" for training other field personnel proved to be an extremely successful implementation strategy. It started with simple steps: Campbell literally spent most of a day teaching the initial group of foremen computer basics that most people take for granted, like how to turn a computer on and off. Before long, attitudes changed and success followed.

"It was a really big thing – for both OJ and the company – that he was one of the 'beta foremen' who successfully learned the software," Bergevin points out. "He completely exceeded our expectations."

But after initial rejection of the new technology and then proper training, Jackson says he would never go back to his pre-software days. "I love the software, because it's so easy," Jackson says. "It's much better than paper. I wouldn't want to go back to paper for anything in the world."

### Knowledge workers

Today, Jackson is among 20 Mid Atlantic Asphalt Division field personnel (14 foremen, six superintendents) who use HeavyJob on laptop computers. Jackson brings his laptop to work each day in his company-owned pickup truck. Each night, Jackson spends about 10 minutes entering job-related information – payroll, materials, equipment hours, etc. – into the software. He e-mails the information to his superintendent, who approves it before e-mailing it to the office.

Before the software installation, Jackson's evening paperwork would take an hour or more; the next morning, he'd physically bring the information to the office. Multiply those efforts by the number of Asphalt Division foremen and superintendents, and the soft-

“

**I told them that I would never learn the software. But they said, 'No, you can learn it. Just try it.**

”

— Ottawa (OJ) Jackson,  
crew foreman for Aggregate Industries

ware has enhanced the division's efficiency dramatically.

"Sometimes it would take days for a superintendent to turn in a time sheet, because they had to come into the office," Campbell recalls. "Some of the time sheets would have gas spilled on them, or they'd be ripped. Sometimes they'd get lost underneath the seat of the pickup truck or even fall out of the truck. There are a million bad things that can happen to paper, but there's not much that can happen to computer-fed payroll."

Jackson's success at using the software underscores a key point that HCSS frequently makes: a construction company can improve its bottom line from the bottom up by treating field personnel as "knowledge workers" who are capable of learning new technologies and acting on the improved information they now receive. Give foremen and superintendents the proper tools—including field management software—to do their job, and adequately train and support them on those tools. The result: field personnel will "think like owners" for their and the company's mutual benefit.

Jackson's training on the software occurred at the location where he was most comfortable: on the job at the new Woodrow Wilson Bridge, which spans the Potomac River and connects Virginia and Maryland. Campbell visited him there several times during a two-month period. She'd spend 30 to 60 minutes at the site, and train Jackson on the software during occasional breaks in his work.

"It was important that OJ was in the right environment to learn," Campbell says. "He felt comfortable out in the field; if he'd had to come into the office and sit at a desk to learn, it would have held him back."

For the first week or two of training, Jackson continued to fill out paper time sheets. "That was just to help me get used to it," Jackson explains. "Ever since then, I've stopped using paper and been doing it all in the software."

Jackson points out multiple benefits for both him and the company. "When you're doing time sheets by hand, for example, you used to have to write down all of the workers' names every day," he recalls. "But now you just have to go to the job, and the software brings the names right up. You don't have to write down anything. If it's a new job, you just pick the names out of the soft-

## Applications & Innovations

ware and bring them to your time card. It's the same with equipment and trucks: you just bring them up, and insert their time. All you have to do is change the job numbers or cost codes."

The cost codes and their descriptions have been imported into the software, which means he doesn't have to spend time contacting the office for that information. Jackson adds that he doesn't play phone tag with the office. "If they want to send me a message, they just send me an e-mail," he explains. "When I go into my laptop in the evening, I always get whatever the office has sent me that day."

Doing time sheets on the software also means that employees are paid the correct amount, on time. "When we used paper and pencil, sometimes a worker's name would be misspelled on the time sheet," Campbell explains. "If payroll couldn't read their names, their checks could be delayed. But that no longer happens. Everyone's a lot happier. The software has saved the company a lot of heartache in terms of payroll."

Jackson may have learned a new skill set – software – but he's in no hurry to try the past time enjoyed by most people his age: retirement.

"I don't have any plans to retire," he explains. "If I were to stop working, I wouldn't have anything to do. My doctors tell me that the muscles I've been using for



**Kellie Campbell**, field support specialist for the Asphalt Division of Aggregate Industries' Mid-Atlantic Region, trained 78-year-old foreman Ottaway (OJ) Jackson on field management software while he was on the job at the newly recently built Woodrow Wilson Bridge. ▲

years would shut right down and I wouldn't last too long. So, as long as I can work, I'll work" – while his laptop and software continue to make his life easier than he ever imagined. ❖

Article and photos courtesy of HCSS and Aggregate Industries

**Coming in November**

**BETTER Roads**

**Bridge Inventory 2009**

"Our award-winning state-by-state look at trends in deficient and obsolete bridges is designed to help the industry better understand real infrastructure needs."

Joe Donald, Publisher, Better Roads ([jdonald@rrpub.com](mailto:jdonald@rrpub.com))