

PRODUCT & EQUIPMENT MARKET

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G Good information leads to good decisions

For Greg Jackson, controller at heavy contractor Reece Albert Inc. of San Angelo, Texas, the goal for implementing field-management software was relatively straightforward. The company wanted to improve the quality of its information from the field and, ultimately, its decision making.

“If you don’t have good information,” Jackson explained, “you can’t make good decisions. I don’t view software in terms of how much time we’re saving or payback period as much as how it improves our quality of information.”

Making good decisions has helped the privately owned Reece Albert

grow from its founding in 1940 by the late Reece Keith “Pete” Albert as a parking lot contractor with three pieces of heavy equipment. It has evolved into one of the largest heavy-construction contractors in West Texas, with more than 400 employees and annual revenues exceeding \$60 million.

The company performs paving, earthwork, bridge building, underground-utilities construction, materials mining and production services for private and public customers. It also boasts an unusual specialty: building and troubleshooting “tight tolerance” test tracks on which major tire manufacturers test vehicle tires. The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) accounts for slightly more than half its revenues.

The old way

For decades, Reece Albert tracked labor, equipment, production quantities and other job-related information using a system familiar to many heavy-construction companies. A superintendent would record, by hand, labor hours, equipment, production



quantities and other information on paper. That information was then faxed to the office or driven in—sometimes hundreds of miles—typically once per week.

Once in the office, that information was copied and edited for multiple purposes before it was entered into the company's accounting system.

"We had mounds of paper from the field that virtually no one wanted to go through," Jackson explained. "We had valuable information in that paper—if only we could get to it. We had a few people who were actually willing to dive in and find notes on what we did on a particular day, but that was very inefficient. The system also was prone to error."

A better way

Reece Albert decided that enabling its project managers and superintendents to employ field-management software with laptop computers could improve its information and thus its operations. The software, they reasoned, would yield some of the benefits they had been missing with a manual system: increased accuracy, one-time entry of data into the system and—very important—faster access to critical job-related information.

Lon Albert, great-nephew of Reece Albert and son of current company President Jack Albert, headed the company's search for a field-management software package. They chose HeavyJob Field Management Software from Houston-based HCSS.

Field personnel input time card, equipment and production information into a laptop computer, typically from their pickup trucks or a remote office. They relay the information electronically each day to a server at San Angelo headquarters, wirelessly or via a landline Internet connection.

Once the information is in the office system, everyone with clearance can access it to analyze jobs, review performance of individual employees and equipment and pinpoint potential problems. The software automatically performs critical calculations like certified payroll.

"Sitting at my computer at my desk, I can read the notes made by the supervisors on my jobs, identify the people who worked on them and

the production they got that day and see the equipment that was there," explained Project Manager Craig Odom. "There's a lot of information at my fingertips that I can access without having to spend an hour on the phone with a superintendent."

Doing it right

When installing a major software product, success comes to those who

ware firm's Houston headquarters.

"The goal of the implementation meeting was to get every detail worked out, so that you consider every scenario before training the staff on the new software," Jackson said. "You identify who will input the data, what they'll do with it once it's in the system and countless other details. You leave nothing to chance."

Soon afterward, HCSS began the



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devote the necessary time, effort and planning and ensure that personnel who will use the system receive the proper training and other resources.

It also helps to acknowledge the level of computer literacy of the employees who will be trained. Several Reece Albert superintendents were computer novices, and thus basic terms and functions, like "mouse click" and "icon," were patiently and clearly explained to them.

Reece Albert started the process by sending top managers—Jackson, Albert, Odom and Contract Administrator Kyle Gould—to meet with key HCSS personnel (programmers, managers, support personnel) at the soft-

first of three training sessions in San Angelo for 27 Reece Albert office/accounting staff, project managers and superintendents. They were divided into three groups to enhance individual training. HCSS personnel spoke beforehand with Reece Albert superintendents, at company headquarters and at jobsites, to assess their needs.

Mission accomplished

More than a year after implementing and training on the software, Reece Albert field personnel, office/accounting staff and executives can pinpoint the benefits.

The company has a detailed record

customer as well as Reece Albert. “Previously, we couldn’t really get to that information until long after the fact,” Jackson explained. “How many square yards of paving or hot mix went down on a particular day? How many cubic yards of cut and fill? How many linear feet of pipe? We not only capture those items now, but we can also see the data through yesterday—a process that used to take a week. We also have detailed notes when a customer has made a change at the jobsite.”

The company can easily locate equipment, rather than relying on a yard superintendent’s memory, and thus assign it to a job on short notice. Integration of its estimating and field-management software has helped Reece Albert reduce by approximately 75% the amount of time required to transfer bid data from its estimating software into its field management and accounting software packages.

“That means we’re able to spend our time focusing on other things,” said Albert.

Increased efficiency has been an overriding result of its use of field-management software, according to Odom.

“Anyone in the heavy-construction business—or anyone who works, period—is always concerned with efficiency, because that relates directly to profitability,” he said. “Thanks to a concerted effort, we’ve been able to streamline our processes and improve our efficiencies.”

—contributed by Jim Fulton for HCSS

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