



Blind Men and Elephants

By Mark Wilkie

In a poem by John Godfrey Saxe, which references an ancient tale, six blind men set out to describe an elephant. Each was positioned in front of a different part of the elephant, and each had a radically different interpretation of what it was. One man felt the elephant's side and declared it to be a wall. Another felt the leg and was convinced the elephant was a tree. Another felt the trunk and said it was a snake, and so it went.

In my 20 plus years of implementing large-scale business solutions, this tale still rings true. For each part of your business, a separate tool is required. Unfortunately, each of these tools has a very limited perspective and interacts narrowly with your business as a whole. Each tool has a completely different view, and, like the blind men in the tale, each comes up with a different answer.

This is the reason why the concept of seamless technology integration is important. The more your tools operate in conjunction with one another and perform their specific tasks within the context of your business as

Seamless technology integration increases the overall efficiency and quality of your business

a whole, the more your costs will decrease, your efficiency will increase, and your overall quality will go up.

In a typical framing enterprise with multiple hardware and software tools, each tool has a specific task and operates in its own information silo, often requiring time consuming manual duplication. For example, what if you could eliminate the need to manually set the stops at a chop station by scanning a work order right at the station? It would eliminate the duplication of manual data entry and decrease the chance of errors. The same benefits can be realized at joining and mat cutting stations. By scanning a work order at each station you instantly know what type of underpinner nails to use for joining, and your computerized mat cutter knows the exact dimensions and quantity of mats to cut. With a seamless approach the dilemma of manually duplicating information throughout your enterprise is eliminated.

This dilemma is not new nor is it unique to the

framing industry. Most businesses, regardless of how small or large they happen to be, have different information and tool silos. It's not uncommon, for example, to find businesses using a combination of mini-solutions, including spreadsheets, small databases, stand-alone hardware, and a couple of packaged, off-the-shelf products. These tools—hardware and software—are isolated and are at best cobbled together with the equivalent of duct tape and baling wire.

The trend of Enterprise Application Integration tools began in the early 1990s as enterprises started to grapple with how to “glue” their different technology silos together. The trend is well established. Efficiency and quality requirements demand that technology silos share information. This is the seamless approach.

Two relevant points emerge from the tale about the blind men and the elephant. The first is that each blind man had a different point of view, and that point of view was entirely correct but limited. Second, if the blind men would have trusted one another and collaborated instead of arguing, a fairly accurate picture of the elephant would have presented itself. Drawing from this analogy, each of the tools used in your business has a very specific task to perform and a one-size-fits-all approach is unreasonable.

The benefits of using a seamless technology approach to run your business are many. There are very real financial benefits. With increased communication among tools, quality goes up, errors go down, and customer satisfaction increases. As overall quality and delivery efficiency increases, costs go down while your average sale price goes up. Imagine being able to visualize a potential job, price it, cut the mats, and chop the moulding, all without having to manually transfer information among any of the tools required to complete the job. This is the vision of seamless technology integration that is finally starting to be realized in today's production framing environment. ■

Mark Wilkie is vice president of product development and manufacturing for Wizard International, Inc., a hardware and software solution provider for the framing industry. Mark has over 20 years of experience in implementing large-scale enterprise solutions for Sony UK, UMBRO International, and Microsoft. He lives in Washington state with his wife and two sons.

