

# Stop 'chasing your tail'

**In the race for technology, the winners are those who learn to merge high-tech tools with business strengths.**



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**B**usiness writers and motivational speakers love to compare business to sports, and racing analogies are ubiquitous. One story you may have missed, however, is the one about Clear Mary, an amazing greyhound racing dog.

Clear Mary was a very fast dog, trained to run and chase the electric rabbit round and round the track. One day, she took off out of the starting gate along with many other dogs, and then suddenly she stopped. She watched the tail ends of the other dogs racing after that rabbit, and she looked at the rabbit whirring around to the other side of the track. Everyone was shouting, "run, run," and "look at that stupid dog." Suddenly, Clear Mary jumped the guardrail and sped over to the other side of the track. Leaping at just the right time, she caught that rabbit as it was going by.

Sometimes business owners and decision makers can feel a bit like the greyhound racing dog when chasing after ever-changing technology. Just when we get close to what we think we need, something better, faster or smarter comes along. And we keep running. But maybe we need to be more like Clear Mary. Maybe we need to stop, think about the skills we already possess, and go after the technology that can improve our strengths and give us true business advantage.

## A true-life example

In Northeast Ohio, one familiar, long-established concrete contractor is demonstrating how to blend experience and craftsmanship with efficient, cost-cutting technology products. Cleveland Cement Contractors (CCC), established in 1944, has its stamp on many postwar downtown buildings as well as other major developments in the area. With a second office in Richmond, VA, the company posted 2004 revenues in excess of \$45 million and employs up to 400 workers at any given time. Having produced a variety of concrete installations in many states in the nation, Cleveland Cement is the recipient of numerous commendations and awards, including the Builders Exchange Craftsmanship Award.

According to Marin Ziemianski, controller at CCC, the company is certainly not the most sophisticated high-tech contractor around, but it is continuously and systematically incorporating essential technology components into its operating budget. For example, communications and data exchange with its Richmond office has improved dramatically since the company added a terminal service through its Windows 2000 operating system. That has allowed CCC to centralize computing resources and manage its remote users through a high-speed, dedicated connection.

The new communication and networking technology has simpli-

fied many areas of operation at CCC, from finding jobs and preparing bids to faster communications between staff and offices. "We recently purchased an HP Plotter," Ziemianski said. "So we are now able to easily print out blueprints and determine if it's something that will work for us. We have one staff member who has been prospecting plan rooms, such as the one Builder's Exchange has, and we've come up with a couple of nice jobs from them."

Another major technology upgrade came four years ago when the company replaced an outdated DOS-based accounting system with a construction-specific job costing system designed specifically for labor intensive contractors. The contractor used to have a hard time tracking real-time labor costs since data was collected and posted just once every week. "The data was always somewhat suspect because of redundant data entry and no verification. Now we always know where we are at with labor and the accuracy of payroll gives us a lot more flexibility," Ziemianski said.

"With our old system, we could only keep two years of data on the server, and our Richmond office could send us only monthly batch files," Ziemianski said. "We are now able to get data much faster and with less effort. The data entry workload decreased so much, in fact, that when two support people left, we didn't need to replace them."

**CCC's most recent equipment upgrade includes a self-leveling laser screed that uses an on-board computer to measure screed elevation and automatically make contouring and leveling adjustments.**

Perhaps the best example of how CCC merges business strength with technology lies in their equipment and machinery investments. Having perfected the scientific and engineering aspects of concrete installation, the company is now increasing its overall efficiency thanks to the help of some high-tech tools. With the purchase of a new computerized sensing system that tracks concrete temperature, CCC is able to more accurately predict concrete curing rates, which in turn can save time and

money on projects.

CCC's most recent equipment upgrade includes a self-leveling laser screed that uses an on-board computer to measure screed elevation and automatically make contouring and leveling adjustments. This fully programmable machine is capable of producing the highest quality concrete work. "Not only can it automatically set curbs and pitch for drains, but it is very good at doing warehouse floors that need to be super flat," Ziemianski says.

#### **Keep moving**

Always expanding (but never chasing), CCC is considering a few new technology purchases this year. The primary focus in 2005, according to Ziemianski, will be to further improve communications. He's considering a VPN network that will allow project managers and other off-site people to have access to their system. "One of the other things we want to do is have net meetings," he said. He would also like to update their job-site cell phones with the new BlackBerry mobile communication device that combines mobile phone, walkie-

talkie and PDA with qwerty keypad into one hand-held unit.

Regardless of which technology products Cleveland Cement Contractors decide to pursue, chances are they will make the right decisions. And that's because they know their business as well as their strengths. Like Clear Mary, they've discovered the path to success. **BXM**

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