

Minnesota Elevator's Service Division Gets a Lift from IFS Software

Minnesota Elevator, Inc. (MEI) began in 1971 as a one-person elevator maintenance company. Since then, it has grown into a \$30 million-per-year business that employs 200 people. Today, MEI is directly involved in all aspects of the elevator business, including manufacturing, installation, modernization, and maintenance. It sells custom elevators directly to end customers as well as to other elevator companies that sell the products under their own brand names. MEI elevators are in service in nearly every U.S. state as well as in Mexico, Canada, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Iceland, and China.

The challenge

Minnesota Elevator's service team needed a way to respond to emergencies more quickly and manage its regular preventive maintenance services more efficiently. One challenge was that the company's 17 technicians cover a large geographical area, including Mankato, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Rochester, and St. Cloud. Communicating service information to them in a timely manner was no small chore. Also, the technicians service a wide variety of equipment, making information tracking more difficult.

"On the elevators we service, we track many of the major components and list them on the service ticket—the models, manufacturers, and so on," said Mike Burns, Minnesota Elevator's Director of Information Systems. "In the past, we would collect that information during a customer visit only to discover later that it hadn't been entered into our old standalone system correctly. Or we might find that it had been stored in a different database so that it wouldn't appear automatically on the next work order."

To complicate matters, technicians in different service locations might track information differently.

"Some of our technicians used databases, others



had three-ring binders, and others just shoved paper in file cabinets," Burns said. "It was a real struggle to keep all this information together."

The company needed an effective, centralized system of tracking service needs and communicating with the field—a system in which data is stored in one place, is consistent and accurate, and can be maintained easily.

The solution

Minnesota Elevator evaluated several software systems. Among them were two systems that had been designed for the manufacturing industry but lacked many features needed by service operations.

"We could hammer stuff in and twist them to make them sort of work, but we really didn't get the seamless integration that we wanted," Burns said.

Feeling that these products were inadequate, the company selected IFS Applications™ for Service Management. This Microsoft® Windows®-based software package, designed specifically for the service industry, allows users to automate and streamline service offerings and ensures that the information is integrated, accessible, accurate, and easy to use.

Among the factors that led Minnesota Elevator to choose IFS were:

- **Data accessibility:** Company personnel can easily find and retrieve the data they need.
- **Flexibility:** Minnesota Elevator's information systems staff can easily customize the terminology that appears in the user interface to better reflect the company's business activities.
- **Vendor stability:** IFS is well established and is a long-time leading provider of enterprise software throughout the world.
- **Application architecture:** IFS Applications was designed from the ground up for the Windows platform. It does not contain legacy code that was ported from a mainframe or minicomputer.

Benefits

Minnesota Elevator began using IFS Applications in mid-2002 and began realizing a return on its investment almost immediately. For example, the company can now maintain detailed customer information in a single database, making it possible to track customers' regular maintenance needs and automatically generate preprinted service orders. Each order tells technicians precisely what needs to be done, what equipment is on the premises, and what replacement parts are needed. Technicians can then check off activities on the work orders as they are completed.

"This is a great benefit because when the work order comes back to our main office, our staff has a much clearer understanding of what's been done. Previously, technicians—their hands covered with grease—had to scribble notes about the tasks they had performed. Often, the notes were written in a hurry on a poor writing surface, making them nearly illegible," Burns said. "Now the tasks are already in our system and are printed on each work order. All the technicians need to do is record the number of hours they spent and the parts they used."

Because the IFS system allows the service department to operate more efficiently, the company has been able to handle more service calls—and gain additional revenue—without having to hire more workers.

"One of our goals is to grow our service base, and

IFS' service management software plays a key role in that strategy," Burns said. "As we accumulate data on different kinds of equipment, we can consolidate it into a single system. Each time we bid on a job, we can instantly retrieve information on the equipment's history, allowing us to put together a more competitive bid."

Although the service management capabilities are tightly integrated with the other IFS components that have been installed elsewhere within the company, the IFS software allows the service division the ability to function as its own virtual company for purposes of tracking performance.

In the future, Minnesota Elevator plans to use the IFS software's capabilities to an even greater extent to continually improve the service division's performance. For example, the company is investigating the possibility of dispatching service technicians by sending work orders and requirements directly to handheld computing devices. Web-based portals may be used to allow personnel throughout the enterprise to view real-time information about service activities and performance. Finally, the company hopes to use IFS' service management component to proactively monitor service calls, providing data that manufacturing can use to improve product quality.

"For us, IFS Applications is a tool that better enables us to manage a win-win relationship with our customers," Burns said.

Software

Installed: IFS Applications™ for Service Management, IFS Distribution™, IFS Accounting Rules™, IFS Business Modeler™

Planned: IFS Manufacturing™, IFS Financials™, IFS/Time and Attendance™, IFS Maintenance™, IFS/Project Delivery™, IFS Business Performance™, IFS Project Management™, IFS Personal Portal™

Hardware

Compaq® ProLiant™ DL380 PC, dual 500 MHz Intel® Xeon™ processors, Microsoft® Windows NT® 4.0 operating system