

Laser cutting - the 'complete job'

Established 40 years ago, Stevens & Carlotti has grown to become one of Kent's largest sheet metal fabricating companies. It has occupied its present site in Sandwich for more than 10 years and, with 75 employees, provides a comprehensive array of cutting, punching, folding, machining, assembly and paintshop facilities. Its products range from simple brackets and assemblies, in up to 25 mm thick mild steel and 8 mm thick stainless steel, to complete control panels, fuel tanks and canopies for customers in industries as diverse as power generation, pump manufacture and aircraft ground support equipment.

"Our wide range of services has enabled us to establish a 'complete job' mentality, both with our customers and workforce," says director Marco Carlotti. "By undertaking virtually everything in-house, we maintain much greater control over quality and delivery lead times on all our orders."

Until 10 years ago, all of Stevens & Carlotti's laser cutting requirements were subcontracted out. But with growing demand for profiling work, the company started to look seriously at investing in its own equipment. This led to the company's first laser cutting equipment purchase in 1998, a manually-fed 2 kW LVD machine. A year later, a second machine was added to service further business growth.

Equipped with a shuttle table loading and unloading system, the second machine represented the company's first steps in work handling automation. But as its profiling requirements continued to expand, Stevens & Carlotti looked again at ways of increasing productivity and throughput.

"I visited Prima's stand at MACH 2004 to check out the capabilities of its Platino machine," says Mr Carlotti. "I was immediately impressed by its speed and accuracy, as well as its ability to be equipped



with a series of work handling solutions. After evaluating the Platino's price/performance, low maintenance requirements and compact footprint against competitive equipment, we selected a 4 kW Prima machine, complete with 10-storey TowerServer automated work handling system capable of 'lights out' operation."

The ability to extend unmanned running beyond the normal working day offered significant cost benefits. Yet it took a while, and the installation of a webcam monitoring system that enabled Mr Carlotti to check the status of the machine from home, to build confidence that the Prima installation really would run for hour after hour without attention.

"It transformed our laser cutting capabilities, literally overnight. We can load the TowerServer with up to 30 tonnes of raw material, program the machine to produce a variety of jobs in different material specs and gauges, press the start button and walk away," says Carlotti. "The machine will simply continue to run until it has completed all of its jobs, or it runs out of material.

"I estimate that the shorter cycle times of the Prima machine, combined with its automated work handling system, have resulted in a 10-fold increase in

productivity over the previous manually fed lasers we had on site."

Within a year, the second ageing LVD machine had been replaced by a further Platino installation – this time featuring one of Prima's latest CompactServer units.

One of the key benefits of this work handling solution is that it has been designed to both fit above and integrate with the laser machine's pallet changer without requiring any additional floor space. It is suitable for sheets up to 1500 mm x 3000 mm and features two shelves, each with a 3000 kg payload and a maximum raw or finished material stack height of 150 mm.

Like Stevens & Carlotti's previous Platino/TowerServer combination, the CompactServer equipped machine will also run under 'lights out' conditions if required.

"Many of our contracts are for repeat work and although batch quantities are not very large, typically between 30 and 100 units, the ability to respond quickly and flexibly to customers' needs can often make the difference between winning or losing the business."

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