

Community e-service

On-line trading communities for spares have become a reality. Laura Cork looks at what this means to those at the sharp end

achieving the optimum spares stockholding is a goal shared by all manufacturers, whatever their sector. The cost of holding and disposing of a spares surplus can be as much of a problem as finding out that a crucial cog is missing during a maintenance shutdown.

Can the Web be used to help in this process? The internet revolution has spawned various companies offering the facility to buy and sell spares. MRO.com, from software firm PSDI, is one such site where buyers and suppliers can come together. The offering takes three forms: a licensed package operating as a Web-based supplier-managed catalogue for users of the company's Maximo computerised maintenance management system (CMMS); an open internet marketplace for organisations not using the maintenance tool; and a private exchange version where a manufacturer can effectively lease the software to its distributors to e-enable the supply network.

Other virtual marketplaces include endorsia.com – an 'enhanced' private exchange version of MRO.com – which

can be used in real time or for batch order processing. New kid on the block globaloverstock is an umbrella organisation which has just launched engineeringoverstock.com, and which has plans to launch similar services for automotive, manufacturing and medical markets in the forthcoming months.

But talk of spares e-revolutions, interfaces and integration sounds somewhat remote from activities at the sharp end. What do these sites mean in reality for today's maintenance manager?

Sean Leach, engineering maintenance manager at Laporte Chemicals in Hythe, Kent, heard of sparesFinder.com at the start of this year, and called the company in for a demonstration. "It seemed easy to use and the cost was minimal, so we decided to give it a try," he recalls. Leach is an enthusiastic advocate of the service: aside from needing technical support to help establish the firewall, he says very little IT knowledge is required. "Because all our inventory was already recorded on a CMMS, it only took 45 minutes to get our sparesFinder service fully configured. The system is incredibly robust and very easy to use." (See diagram.)

So far, Leach has used the system to 'borrow' parts from other users, replacing them when his own came into stock. Other Laporte sites have not yet signed up to the service, as the group is undergoing operational change. But Leach is confident

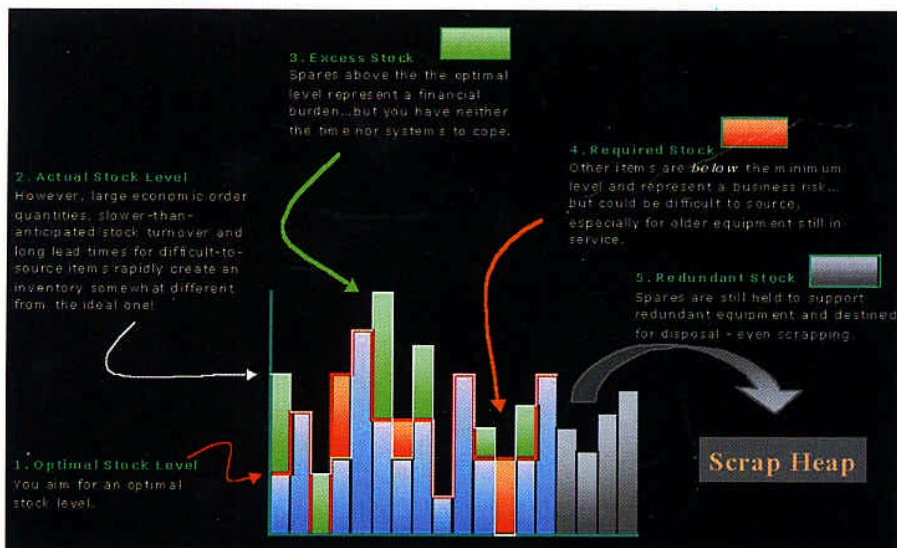
that when they do, the rewards will appear: "Changes to our group structure and other business priorities have meant that we're the only Laporte site using sparesFinder at present, but I can see huge benefits once the other sites come on line. If you consider that a typical chemical processing site like ours holds between £500,000 and £1.5 million of spares, you don't have to be a mathematician to see that even a 10 per cent shaving off these stocks would bring large financial gain." Leach is also actively pushing other plants in his area to sign up, as this will effectively extend his spares stockholding into their stores, and vice versa.

Multi-site

One manufacturer using the service on a multi-site basis is Rugby Cement, now part of the RMC Group. The issue of surplus assets and spares was discussed at an early RMC/Rugby Cement integration meeting – and Rugby had already looked at sparesFinder as a possible means of disposing of surplus stock. Engineering improvement manager Nick Sutherland says: "Following several meetings and demonstrations of the system, it was obvious that this could be a quick and easy solution to providing global visibility, not only to Rugby's spares but those of the whole RMC Group. We originally tried emailing spreadsheets around the business, but this proved difficult and was only as up-to-date as the last time the data was transferred. SparesFinder was a quick and relatively simple way to provide stock visibility."

Sutherland sees two main advantages: when a crucial part is needed, it is possible to see exactly which Rugby Cement site has one and get hold of it quickly, resulting in less downtime and fewer production losses. Secondly, sites have no need to purchase spares if they are already held within the group, saving money and freeing up capital.

The system was originally set up for RMC companies' access only, though Sutherland says some surplus stock has now been released onto the web. "We've not quantified the benefit in financial terms, although the intention was to redistribute several hundred thousand pounds' worth of stock around the business." ■



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