

Time Tracking Takes Flight With Matsushita

Have you ever felt short on time and resources? Ever wished you could do more than just estimate the costs and requirements of a complex project?

That was once the story of Mark Scansen's life at Matsushita Avionics Systems Corporation. Matsushita is a Washington-based company that designs in-flight entertainment systems for airlines around the world. "At MASC, we develop entertainment systems to provide airline passengers with multiple choices of audio and video, plus games, telephony and more. Our newest systems are essentially flying intranets with hundreds of computers involved, offering all of the features of our other systems, plus video- and audio-on-demand, shopping, and more." said Scansen.

Matsushita's systems are used on lengthier flights, such as international routes. Passengers board the airplane to find individual control panels at each seat, so that they can make entertainment selections throughout the flight. Since each system offers a wide variety of features, flight crews must be well trained on them in order to help passengers mid-flight.

This is where Scansen and his team get involved. Scansen is the manager of Matsushita's technical training and multimedia groups. Together, these groups develop customized training materials and teach each customer's employees how to administer their unique in-flight system.

Crunching the Numbers

For each customer, Scansen needed to accurately predict the time and resources his teams require to reach their goal. The problem? Every project at Matsushita is different, since the company customizes its systems to fit each customer's needs. Projecting costs for all these simultaneous tasks was once a shot in the dark for Scansen, who said he started out managing these departments "under siege and understaffed."

Until he discovered TimeSheet Professional, that is. In 1997, Scansen and his teams began using the

project-based time tracking software – published by Best Software, Inc. of Dallas – to record their activities and specific task times. The software helped them gather a wealth of information, which Scansen could then apply to future project estimates. And the result? On-target expenses, superior justification for increasing staffing levels, and on-time completion.

"We train several thousand students and host several hundred training events per year," Scansen said. "We can now accurately forecast all the variables involved and hold ourselves accountable for the estimates we give."

"And now, I can accurately predict increases in workload far enough in advance to justify the additional personnel, plus recruit, train and deploy them in time to meet the need. I now have the data to prevent having my workload doubled without increasing my workforce," he said.

But what led Scansen and Matsushita to select TimeSheet Professional for their project needs?

"I wanted to get at the data," Scansen said. "I didn't want to work with someone else's view of the universe. I liked the flexibility of TimeSheet Professional, which has a very open and extendible interface. Other systems were too proprietary or required a complex export process."

Project Management - The Next Step in Automation

By 1999, Scansen and his groups were ready to take their time tracking program a step further by linking TimeSheet Professional to their project management software. Using a new TimeSheet Professional interface to Microsoft Project '98, Matsushita was able to automate its task lists so that project data would now be updated instantly.

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Scansen said those reports are helping Matsushita’s product support executives track the success and cost of supporting each system they develop. The company can determine which systems are more expensive to maintain and also which systems require the most training.

To achieve this, Matsushita makes extensive use of TimeSheet Professional’s task fields. Scansen identified 10 levels of information to be tracked:

- 1) employee
- 2) project
- 3) customer
- 4) program
- 5) system
- 6) audience/group
- 7) deliverable [type of product or training to be delivered]
- 8) phase
- 9) task
- 10) activity.

This level of detail helps his teams to pinpoint task times for each portion of their projects.

And with the automation between their time tracking and project management systems, Scansen said that fewer administrative activities are required after his teams enter their timed data. Also, they can now do real-time queries based on information they just entered.

This improved process of tracking Matsushita’s time and projects has made a “night-and-day difference,” Scansen said. “I am going to get at least 15 percent of my departments’ time back. And if you take that percentage and multiply it by the number of employees in my workgroups, that turns into a big chunk of time.”

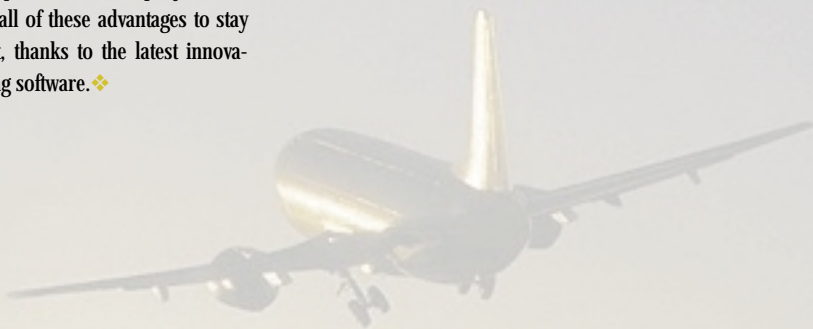
What’s Next for Matsushita

Scansen and his colleagues have more plans ahead, as they continue to refine Matsushita’s processes in keeping with the company’s ISO certification policy. New features ahead include more mobility for users who are on the go. Scansen said

they plan to use the remote features that TimeSheet Professional offers, since Matsushita’s trainers travel extensively and need to enter time activity from off-site locations. The convenience of remote time entry will keep the teams’ records up to date, and Matsushita’s busy travelers will have one less task to catch up on upon their return.

Another feature still to come for Matsushita’s project management system is a method for advance project entry. Scansen said their system administrators will be able to pre-load upcoming projects, while designating start and stop dates for each one. As a result, users will be able to focus on current projects only, without having to search through projects that are no longer (or not yet) in progress. Meanwhile, administrators will have the advantage of preparing for future projects ahead of time, so that time entries can be made as soon as the project gets underway.

Streamlined processes, automated task management, and ultra-precise cost projections: Matsushita is using all of these advantages to stay ahead in its market, thanks to the latest innovations in time tracking software. ❖



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