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Info #23

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Info #24

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Info #25

The CNC Shop With Tom Morin



CNC tire kicking

What could be more fun than buying a new machining centre? The technology and speed advance every year, not to mention the sculpted housings and smart colour schemes. Despite the undeniable allure of the machines' appearance, this, along with other features, probably won't affect your bottom line.

Cutting speeds, for example, are already considerably faster than you'll likely ever attempt in your shop. Here's a guide to features more worthy of your consideration.

First, plan how this new tool will be used.

Machining centres can drill and route. Do you need both? Will you need to horizontal drill for dowels, route for shelf standards, groove for backs, notch for toe kicks?

Write down all the construction methods you use and the hardware that holds it together. Make sure your machine will accommodate all of these. Are there enough tool spindles to hold all the various drills you need, or will you have to change your construction method to cut down on the number of tool diameters?

Do you plan to cut whole sheets on the router, or do the cutting on a saw and only machine on the router (this is known as nested versus cell production, and warrants its own future column).

Nesting requires a special table and a powerful vacuum to hold parts in place. Nesting machines can't drill on the horizontal, so you might have to buy a stand-alone boring machine.

Also, think about your maximum part size and whether it will fit on the bed of your router, and that all the tools can reach the whole surface of the part. Many centres are only designed to machine a 24" deep gable.

Now think about which machine will save you the most time. How many work zones does it have? Does the machine have a big enough tool changer to prevent downtime while you load important cutters? Does the machine cut down on material handling, or eliminate the need for a further process? How easy is it to load and unload your parts to and from the machine? Will special aggregate heads let you do operations you currently do manually? Could the machine also be inserting hardware?

Finally, consider overall productivity. Will it be easy to program the machine from the office, or will it have to be done on the shop floor while the machine idles? Will your existing software talk to your new CNC, or will an additional post-processor be needed? How long will it take to train operators? How much training will the vendor provide? Do they have a dedicated training centre?

At some point, every machining centre breaks down. Quality service and support is essential. Not only to fix the gears and bearings, but also the software and computers. You need to have a service manager that you trust.

Remember, this machine will not solve all of your problems. It is one part in a bigger plan, and it has to fit within the plan. Getting the right machine takes thorough planning of your whole product line. Stay focused on getting the machine that will build your product. Make sure it's easy to program; that employees can be quickly trained on it; and that it has the potential to be serviced quickly when it breaks down.

Tom Morin is the owner of Morin Wood Manufacturing Inc. He can be contacted at tom@morinwood.ca.

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