

Robot night shift gives ALM the competitive edge

A thriving North East manufacturer of quality washroom cubicle hardware has been able to competitively diversify into subcontract engineering with the help of robotic automation. ALM Products, based in Newton Aycliffe, has installed a FANUC Robotics robot for loading and unloading components to a machine tool.

ALM's cubicle products are used throughout the UK in schools, leisure facilities, offices, hotels and hospitals and it has earned a reputation for quality and flexibility of design to meet customer specific requirements. Using quality materials throughout, such as aerospace grade aluminium, has exposed the business to aggressive pricing from both UK and overseas competition.

Using its own considerable in-house resources and capabilities allows ALM to remain competitive and also to provide an efficient subcontract engineering service. Continuous investment in CNC machine tools has seen consistent demand for ALM products and growth in the business resulting in the need for night shift operations.

Andy Hey, ALM Products Sales and Marketing Manager, explains, "Finding 'die hard' night shift operators isn't so easy these days and many tasks required fairly straight forward loading and unloading of components into CNC machines. Using a robot seemed the best option for us and already using FANUC ROBODRILL CNC machines effectively steered us in that direction."

A system was supplied by FANUC Robotics comprising a 10Kg payload FANUC M10-iA robot complete with grippers, guarding and a work input table. A highly compact arm, the M10-iA minimises the amount of space required while allowing several functions, including in process inspection, to be carried out in the same work area.

The work input table allows raw material, for example aluminium cubicle connecting blocks 150mm x 50mm x 10mm, to be stacked and arranged in rows to enable continuous unattended operation. Typically 500 aluminium billets are loaded onto the input table and the system is allowed to run through until all blocks have been finish machined.

"Maybe in the early days of installation the investment could have seemed extravagant for a smaller business such as ALM", continues Andy, "we initially had a limited knowledge and the changes in batch were frequent but we've learnt to adapt and find what's best for the cell that can run through the night totally unmanned – now we're reaping the rewards and benefits."

“From a subcontract engineering capacity viewpoint the robot has given us the advantage of saying to a customer that we can turn round say 400 off components for a next day delivery without the cost of a night shift – this makes us very competitive.”

From the business view point ALM believes the investment sends out a strong message, concludes Andy, “For our industry we’re cutting edge, the system has proved to be relatively low cost for us, maintaining our high quality reputation while remaining competitive and increasing our subcontract resources – we’ll probably be investing in more!”



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Photography and graphics:

Contact David Wickham davidw@jonoliver.com for digital images

Issued by:

Jon Oliver Communication Ltd.

+44-(0)1902-757115

davidw@jonoliver.com

Further information:

Maurice Hanley – UK Sales and Marketing Manager

e-mail: hanleym@fanucrobotics.co.uk

Tel: 024 7663 9669

Visit our web site:

www.fruk.co.uk

Notes to editors:

FANUC Robotics UK Limited provides integrated robotic process solutions for manufacturing industry. A wholly owned subsidiary of FANUC Limited of Japan, FANUC Robotics has been established in the UK since 1982. Operating from its 2,200 sq mtr facility in Coventry, FANUC employs over 45 staff, and supports an installed UK base approaching 6,000 robots.