LK's 'soft' sell strategy

LK's new business strategy is becoming tangible following the launch of its Camio Studio 4 software and related announcements. Andrew Allcock explains

John Baker, CEO and managing director of co-ordinate measuring machine technology developer LK, Castle Donington, Derby, embarked on a new strategy for the company 2fi years ago and Charlie Edgington was brought on board to help with one aspect of that.

The new strategy was to move the company away from selling machines with embedded metrology expertise, service and support and try to get the most out of the individual elements of the business that go to make up the whole, promoting the company as a metrology solutions business.

To do this, the 200-employee company was restructured into profit-and-loss centres based around the individual technologies – a machines business; a controller business; a software business; and a service business.

As software business director, Mr Edgington is responsible for the software element of this new strategy, expanding the sale of software outside the traditional areas. "I joined a very machine-centric company. More than half of machine sales last year (2003) were secured on the strength of Camio Studio 3. But while the software has a lot of pull for machine sales, as a business in its right it is not a high flyer."

But, as he explains, £30 million-plus turnover LK operates in a market that is dominated by one American company and one German company, with LK among the handful of first division players that follow. "For us to compete in this market, it is really about how smart you are in the way that you conduct your business. For example, a large company may have 10 times as many engineers developing its software. Our advantage is that we have the flexibility associated with a small team, but we can't

afford to have our teams make the wrong decision." Currently all software is written internally: "We mustn't surrender the metrology expertise that we can deliver through our software because within it are our key selling points," Mr Edgington affirms.

The way forward for LK is to address much more of the business process, he offers. "I believe that the market falls into two areas. The top end is where the large corporates are and where things are getting sophisticated. All of the [CMM] manufacturers have been focused on selling to the quality function, but now quality is integrated with production itself and so a much bigger change has occurred, especially in the automotive and aerospace sectors.

"And what these companies are interested in is the management of their total manufacturing process. I think we can bring a lot more to that as LK, but it does mean that LK software has to move away from just being bundled with its own machines."

IT'S A SIGN

The first visible software development following this new strategy and Mr Edgington's appointment was the launch of Camio Studio 4 at MACH last April, and it demonstrates this broader target area.

"The launch of Camio Studio 4, for the first time, provides a solid foundation for
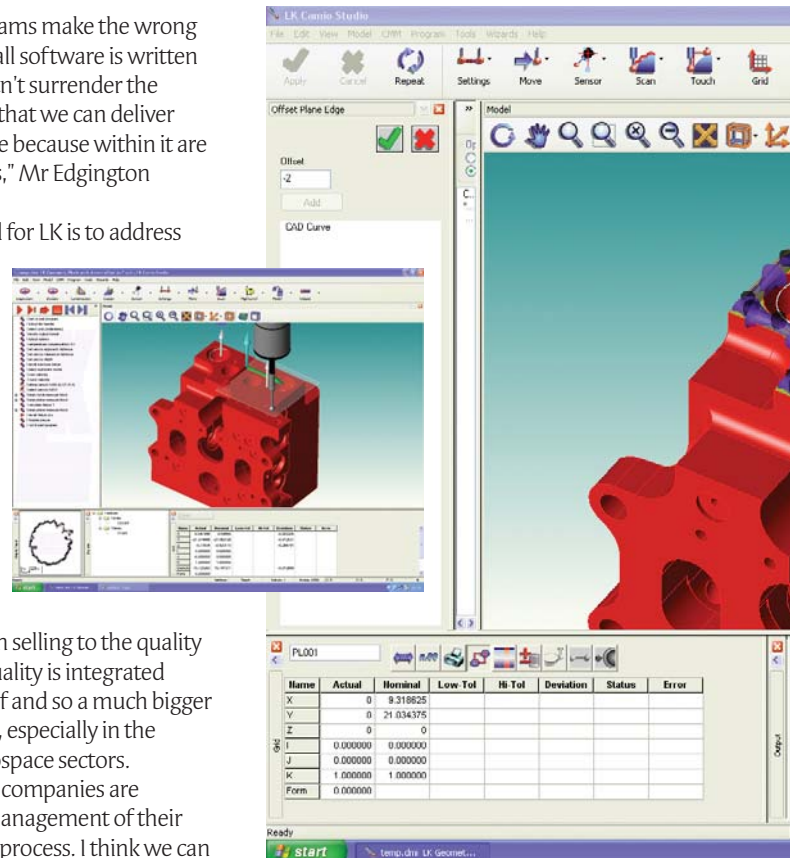
the porting of Camio Studio software onto technologies other than LK CMMs, including articulated arms and other manufacturers' CMMs," said LK at the launch and Mr Edgington added that this supports the corporates' thinking in terms of having a flexible workforce able to move between different types of equipment.

But how is LK differentiating its software from others? The software business director says that customers do not select on a feature-by-feature basis.

"Decisions are nearly always based on the comfort factor or a technology decision that the customer is making and which is, perhaps, radical.

"We have recognised that analogue scanning is coming of age and we have focused a lot of our attention on this in Camio Studio 4, working very closely with Renishaw and its SP25 scanning probe, so there is a lot more analogue scanning capability."
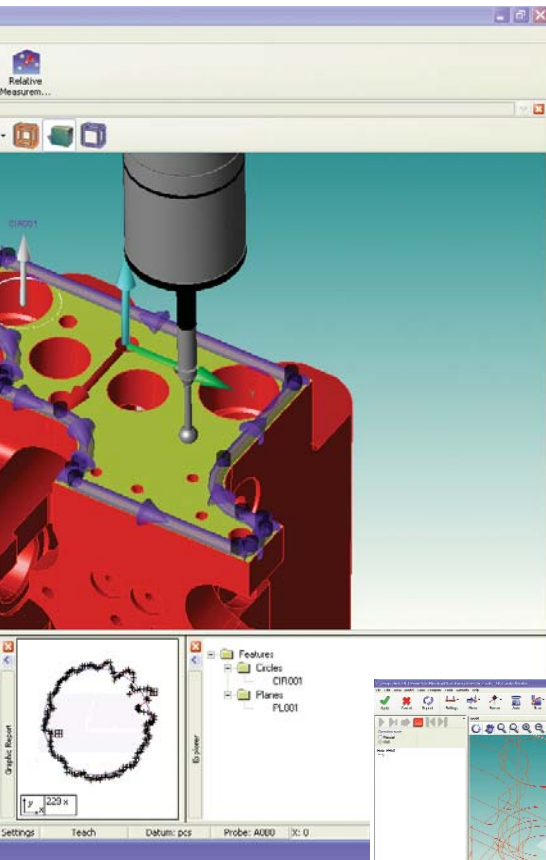
Key also in the new version is the capability to create programs quickly, with this supported by a 'rules/wizard-based' approach that supports the generation of a scanning program for cylinders in a cylinder block, for example. But the user interface overall has seen a major change. "Studio 3 was the first major move into the CAD-based interface environment, but with Camio Studio 4 we have changed the look and feel radically," Mr Edgington explains.

The new environment is a context-based one, so only the screens/functions required for the job in hand are presented. Furthermore, the user can design and save screen layouts to suit particular requirements.

Incidentally, the company's established CMIS programming language user base will, in due course, be offered a way to benefit from this new technology without having to "surrender the investment they made in the past".

Another important development for the increasingly electronically integrated supply chain is a dramatic increase in the speed at which CAD data can be loaded. By using HOOPS technology, a CAD model that would have taken 15 minutes to load before users could start manipulating data now takes only a couple of minutes. This is increasingly important as corporates want to make their businesses digital and so CAD data becomes ever more information rich with file sizes growing.

Corporates' distributed needs are being targeted too. "We have customers that want to programme in Detroit and load a machine in China and then take the data back to Detroit for analysis. Our reporting package now supports standard internet 'hooks' that allow customers to take the data back into SPC software," reveals Mr Edgington – DML output.

And he sees LK software being used across businesses in a wider fashion. "We want to fit into these corporate processes that are being established and into other people's software, so in the next year you will see us partnering with other companies. Some of these will be competitors in other arenas."

LK's involvement in I++ DME, the universal CMM controller protocol, is pivotal to this. "When we first got involved we were looking at it [I++ DME] purely as the interface onto measuring equipment – the next generation common driver. But if we follow I++ to its logical conclusion, ultimately everybody's software will be able to run on everybody's machine.

"I++ is, in a sense, an attempt to model the entire process and define interfaces from CAD through to inspection planning, development of programs both on- and offline, and reporting and analysis. It's not a standard at this point, but it is influencing developments and we are working with Spatial Technology [CAD graphics] and companies in other areas. Another development you'll see from LK is the integration of CMMs into production lines."

SHARE AND SHARE ALIKE

And latest developments underline this. LK's DMIS-based software enabling CMM programming directly from CAD data is now available on Zeiss controllers and, in return, Zeiss is also porting onto LK's controller. LK and Zeiss are employing the I++ DME approach to implement software interchangeability, which brings CMM users one step closer to their goal of being able to combine the best hardware and software products.

"This opens up a whole new set of possibilities for owners of Zeiss and LK equipment," said Rainer Ohnheiser, managing director of Carl Zeiss Industrial Measuring Technology. John Baker of LK agrees: "With this joint venture, Zeiss and LK take a step forward in providing their customers with new options."

In addition, LK is porting Camio Studio onto Renishaw UCC controllers using the I++ DME interface and onto articulated arms from an unnamed supplier.

But LK's developments for the larger customer are not to be at the expense of its established, smaller users, adds Mr Edgington. Those customers that want a CMM and software package and who program online at the machine will also be supported, he adds. That's why Camio Studio 4 comes in two flavours – Camio Studio DMIS-based software which enables measurement directly from CAD models, plus Camio Inspect for non-CAD applications. **M**