

# WOOD digest



Jasper Desk has been manufacturing custom office furniture consistently for the last 132 years.

## Standing up to change

Jasper Desk remains competitive throughout its 132-year history



## A long history

“There’s not a lot of companies around with that kind of longevity,” says Gramelspacher. “I would say the quality of the product that we’ve built over the years and trying to maintain that hands-on relationship with the customers to try and satisfy their needs” is what has kept the company going.

Over the course of its history, production at Jasper Desk has changed from larger orders and having a finished goods inventory to smaller quantities, quicker lead times, no finished goods inventory and custom designs and finishes, explains Gramelspacher. The company started off with one or two cabinetmakers assembling the desks and has moved to more of an assembly line process today.

“Back then, there weren’t as many office furniture people as there are now. At one time the desk company had up to 12-month lead times, and then in the early ’70s more people jumped into the office furniture arena, and competition forced changes in a lot of ways,” Gramelspacher says. “One of [the changes] was you had to get your lead times way down. Anyway, more in the ’60s and ’70s when people started looking at the cost, they thought ‘we’re not going to hold inventory any more, we’re just going to order per order.’ ”

Jasper Desk has an employee in the purchasing department who has been with the company for 40 years and whose father worked there during the

**T**he world has gone through a remarkable amount of change since 1876. In those 132 years the United States has seen the addition of 14 states to the union; seven wars; labor riots; depression; prohibition; the Wright brothers’ first flight; inventions like the telephone and the incandescent light bulb; the space race; the longest period of prosperity in the 1990s; a loss of labor to global forces; and now the potential of a looming recession.

Through all of these changes, however, one thing has remained constant. Jasper Desk in Jasper, Ind., has worked through the tumultuous economical and social challenges of our time.

The Gramelspacher family has been connected to Jasper Desk since the beginning; although, there was about a 30-year gap in their involvement in the day-to-day management. During that time the family was part of the board of directors. When current president Philip Gramelspacher’s father left the board, he filled the vacancy. In 2000 the board wanted to make a change in the general manager position. Gramelspacher agreed with the need for a change, and offered to take on the new role. “I felt like a change was needed; we needed just more personal, family-type of interest back in the company,” he says.



## JASPER DESK

<b>Year established</b>	1876
<b>Location</b>	Jasper, Ind.
<b>Products</b>	Casegoods
<b>Market area</b>	United States
<b>Facility size</b>	165,000 sq. ft.
<b>Employees</b>	100
<b>President</b>	Philip J. Gramelspacher
<b>Plant manager</b>	Matt Miller
<b>Website</b>	www.jasperdesk.com

Great Depression. During the years of the depression, the plant would more or less shut down until work came in, explains Gramelspacher.

"Whenever an order would come in they'd call in a few people, and they'd build the order and then they'd go back home," he says. "With a history like that — you've gone through world wars and depressions, which you know were really hard to survive. All the challenges we have today probably aren't close to trying to survive those things."

Gramelspacher and plant manager Matt Miller attribute the integrity of Jasper Desk's product, and the ability to maintain that integrity throughout the years, as the key to the company's longevity.

"Also, we have changed from just offering traditional style case goods to include contemporary and transitional styles," Gramelspacher says.

### Streamlining

For some time, Jasper Desk was seeing lead times of around six weeks. However, thanks to efforts made to streamline production, lead times are now down to four weeks. It was just within the last year and a half that the company was able to shrink lead times.

Miller and Gramelspacher both agree that their goal now is to get lead times down to three weeks.

To get the times down, Jasper Desk has worked to streamline its process

and has a new more efficient computer system, Gramelspacher explains.

"We've gotten people more focused on what we need to do to get things through in a timely manner," Miller says. "Changing people's attitudes was a big part of it ... I'm being honest with you; that's a lot of it. You've got to get out of 'that's the way we've always done it' syndrome."

Getting people to move away from that train of thought can be a challenge, however.

"Some people will accept change really quick, embrace it and then others, just because of their personalities, struggle," Gramelspacher says. "In general it's easy to get them to change, but you still have those few ... sometimes it's in the line of your supervisors. That's sort of hard to get changed over."

Streamlining the process was a reaction to customer demands. "The customer wants it more quickly, so we've got to do it more quickly," Gramelspacher says.

Gramelspacher says reducing the amount of movement of materials throughout the plant has helped with the streamlining process and reducing lead times.

### Improving material flow

Material flow is one of Jasper Desk's biggest challenges, according to Gramelspacher.

"We have a hard time with the flow of materials through the plant because we have a mill room that makes parts; then we have a plywood part of the plant that does the machining, and all these parts are built for the order we're going to produce. Then they get sent upstairs to the cabinet room," he says.

Jasper Desk's facility isn't a highly automated plant, Miller says. "Because of small quantities and ones and twos, it's hard to really be fully automated," he says. "The only belt-driven assembly line in the plant is the finishing room. The rest of it is roller conveyor; we roll it from station to station."

Although Jasper Desk has the capabilities to produce all of its plywood pieces itself, it does outsource some specialty faces and some curved plywood. "When



Veneer is spliced from faces and backs to be used in plywood.



Plywood operators show the lamination of faces, backs and cores.



An employee sets up the CMS router to machine a plywood top containing a special sketch face.

we get really busy, we'll supplement some of our dimension parts and plywood on the outside," Gramelspacher says.

"Some people in the desk business buy plywood on the outside and assemble it, but we've always run our own dimension parts and solid [wood] and plywood," Gramelspacher says. "I think that allows us to be more reactive to what the customers' needs are, whether the customer's a special or smaller piece run."

### Staying competitive

Jasper Desk prides itself on offering a "Made in America" product, and believes it is partially responsible for helping



Jasper Desk's offices in Jasper, Ind., as they stand today.

“With a history like that where you’ve gone through world wars and through depressions ... you just did things to survive. All the challenges we have today probably aren’t close to trying to survive those things.”

— Philip Gramelspacher

them remain competitive. Competing with imports has been one of its toughest challenges.

“One of the challenges is imports and how they’ve made their way into the marketplace. Since we make a medium- to high-quality product, we’re protected from that a little bit, but that’s changing,” Gramelspacher says. “We

always have to be aware of it. That’s one reason why we promote American-made products. Basically other than some hardware we have to import because it’s not made domestically, our product is American made. That’s what we try to promote in our marketing plan.”

Marketing itself as American made has helped, but there will always be

some people who are only concerned about price, Gramelspacher says.

“There are just some people who are always going to buy on price and it’s hard to compete with or take care of people who think like that,” he says. “But, if they put a value to the product, look at how it’s made and the quality features of the furniture, along with what you’re paying, Jasper Desk is a good value.”

Although growth is essential to survival, Gramelspacher says Jasper Desk has no intention of becoming a huge company.

“We like the size of the company and the niche that we fill. Frankly, it’s easier to manage a smaller size company. You need growth — don’t get me wrong — but we don’t need to be big to compete against the larger companies in the market place.” **WD**



J A S P E R D E S K

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