**Return on Investment: More than just dollars and cents**

**Why Polymer Solutions implemented a document management system and what it discovered**

There you are. It’s Monday morning. You’ve arrived early, ready to start your week. Coffee is brewing in the staff kitchen. You’re caught up on your emails. You’re desk is relatively clean. Things are looking good. That is, until Bob, your client’s auditor, calls at 9 a.m. to tell you he’s coming for an audit on Wednesday.

If you’re working in a highly regulated industry, this has happened to you (minus being caught up on your emails and the clean desk, of course). It is not unfamiliar territory for Carola Bousserghine, Quality Assurance Manager for Polymer Solutions Inc. in Blacksburg, Va.

“That is my favorite type of audit: the surprise one,” says Bousserghine, invoking her dry wit. Bousserghine has had plenty of experience with difficult audits over the years. She came to PSI five years ago after XX years in the shipping industry. “I needed to learn new standards, but the basics of quality management don’t change. Continuous improvement is the key.”

Polymer Solutions (PSI) is an independent testing lab and a resource for chemical analysis, physical testing, research and development services, and litigation services. You might contract with PSI if your company is having difficulty understanding why a particular plastic component is failing in your product or if you need to test the safety of a new medical device you want to take to market.

PSI’s work with medical device manufacturers, auto makers, governmental agencies and many other organizations requires that it maintain ISO 17025 certification, Code of Federal Regulation (Parts 210, 211, 610 and 820) compliance, Good Manufacturing Practice certification and be subjected to short-notice or surprise audits as well.

“We cannot do our jobs if we don’t have good data,” explains Bousserghine. “Solid, repeatable results help us identify, then solve problems for our clients. Maintaining our quality management system is essential, and everyone here knows it.”

The company has a strong reputation over the past 20 years for solving difficult problems. Employees are experts in their fields, and not surprisingly, they *live* their quality management system. Twelve audits per year means they are either preparing for or participating in an audit each day. Audits take up Bousserghine’s life. And because PSI lives and breathes continuous improvement, three years ago the team began to think up ways minimize the amount of time and disruption they experienced during audits.

“When I worked in the shipping industry, we used software to help us automate our compliance records and in some cases, our processes,” says Bousserghine. “We thought the right system might help us at PSI as well.”

The team at PSI looked carefully at four different software options, evaluating each on price, functionality and several other criteria. They ultimately chose an international company based just a few minutes away in southwest Virginia – Qualtrax. Qualtrax had experience working with small labs and many other organizations that wanted personalized attention and hands-on training. The price was right as well.

When Bousserghine implemented the system, they expected that it would save them time, but the continuous improvements PSI has made since then have exceeded their expectations.

“It’s really difficult to quantify the return on investment of a system like this,” Bousserghine explains. “Time is money, so you can estimate the time savings and then equate that to dollars and cents. But perhaps the biggest benefit is the opportunity we now have to prepare in advance for our scheduled audits.”

Before the document management system was implemented, PSI struggled with mountains of paperwork needed to satisfy auditors instead of focusing their attention on preparing for the audits themselves, and improving their systems and processes overall. Now, that prep time that was once used for paperwork is now used to run systems and process checks, review corrective and preventative actions and conduct final walkthroughs with team members to ensure the audits go smoothly.

There’s even has a formal procedure for preparing for an audit – a continuous improvement PSI has been working on that has had a significant impact on the company’s quality management program.

“It’s never completely stress-free,” Bousserghine says about audits, “but with the document management system in place and a solid procedure for preparing for audits, we don’t feel nearly as harried as we had before.”

Yes your Monday just became a little more stressful, but at least you know you’re prepared for the audit. By Wednesday, Bob will be seated comfortably in front of a company laptop that contains all of the documentation he needs to begin his audit. Your team will have run through key processes, reviewed corrective and preventative actions from previous audits and will be prepared for any interviews they need to participate in.

Really, it’s a quality manager’s dream – to see things going as planned. Just ask Carola Bousserghine at Polymer Solutions Inc.

**About the company**

NAME: Polymer Solutions Incorporated (PSI)

FOUNDED: 1987

LEADERSHIP: Jim Rancourt, Ph.D. (Founder and CEO)

EMPLOYEES: 30

LOCATION: Blacksburg, Va.