31st Storyworth: What Was The Longest Project You Have Ever Worked On?

Without doubt, the longest project I ever worked would have to be described as my 38 year marriage to Lynne, followed closely by raising my daughter Jess who turns 40 in 2022. All my "professional" projects pale by comparison with either, both for importance and duration. But I suspect the question sought to understand some more about those actual compensated roles, so those instead will be my main emphasis.

The longest from gestation to completion had to be the Duracell job, which started with an exploratory development of concept and almost five years later completed with actual plant operations of the "Ultra" packaging, which used the same forming tools and insertion lines, as well as secondary packaging handling, to pack retail Alkaline Batteries in the variety of free-stand paks which would be displayed for sale in any "point of sale" or "impulse buy" retail establishment, made on the same machines which produced mass retailer (think like private label – eg Walmart or Wegman's with adequate display space for hanging paks). Those same machines could therefore be used interchangeably for the normal "Copper Black" Duracell batteries or for the long duration "Ultra" in the same physical package sizes.

Key to the success was the use of existing packaging lines, which negated need for an entirely new plant and equipment, because "Ultra" would actually reduce the total unit sales of a particular cell form, so rapid change-over saved over $40 million in project cost. And rapid change was needed because of the peculiar accounting process used by Duracell within their captive plants (owned by them) vs the more traditional process as used by their contract house, specifically J&J Packaging in Brookville IN. The captive plants assigned all overhead, which meant all engineering and power and costs not directly assignable to an individual package to the downtime for their packaging line, which would then be divided by the total units produced there. So any time they were not actually producing was expensive as hell.

Accordingly, my efforts were aimed at making the same machines and lines usable interchangeably. But making a free-standing pak required that the blister form had to be flat at the bottom, and backfold its flange along that edge and fuse to the front of the card along its lower edge BEFORE filling, then folding the card over the blister to fuse the rest of the card face to that flange, while hanging paks would fuse the full flange around the blister to the card after laying it atop a filled blister, with a step in the fusing tool half the thickness of the blister flange where it sealed most of the flange for both card types. Hang paks had blisters ½ inch up the card.

Doing so required bringing the free-stand cards, facing up, in from the side at the blister feed end of the machine so they were in place before the blister was placed and before the cells were inserted, and fused to the card along the lower edge, while the hanging paks had the cards facing down and placed over the blister after cell insertion, using locating pins on the tooling trays for both, then flip the free-stand card over for final seal at the end of the line using the same final seal press. That way the secondary handling would not care which pak type it saw at the end of the line, so it was a simple matter to assure the right boxes were in place for that, which was the only real down-time, and a selector switch controlled which card feed system was used.

The start of that process had actually been somewhat humorous. I had arrived at Stewart Airport near Newburgh NY where my sister Barb lived with her family, expecting to rent a car to drive to Bethel CT for my interview. It was snowing, and there was a problem with my license so I could not rent a car (an administrative goof which could not be resolved that morning, but was soon thereafter ;-) So thankfully, Barb had a VW Thing available I could use, which I drove to Bethel, about an hour away. Holding the fabric roof header which kept wanting to pop off as I drove I-84 with a heater which basically had two temperatures, both describable as "cold" ;-) Yet I still beat the other major piece of the puzzle, the Sencorp Rep, as their lines were in every one of the plants intended for supply. And key to my selection as Project Manager was my ability to suggest a zero-waste, zero added cost method to achieve the objective. So they hired me to prove it with an "Exploratory" design by revising a single line to do as I suggested.

That involved my travel to Indiana in the winter to live from my RV as well as to Cape Cod, which I hated for its no-passing over its entire length. But the machine worked as I had suggested it would, which prevented the need for disposing waste blister chops, by simply cutting flanges as they always had, but putting steeper draft angle on the top of the blister and zero draft on the bottom, so the cell feeders would work as they had as well, but a 90 deg. base on the blister to the card would provide for free-stand ability. Then Duracell Packaging Engineering had to sell the concept to their management before the "implementation phase" could begin. Thankfully, that arrived while I was in the WORST project ever in Chicago for FelPro, so I jumped at the opportunity. We'll leave it at that ;-)

The only closing note was that Sencorp engineering did not think the Duracell implementation timeline could be met, so resisted until I called their CEO and explained how they were tossing $20 million of pure profit down the drain because I asked them to stretch their comfort zone. They did. And I was right. It worked. Period. ;-)

My longest company relationship was with GE Power, which started with their Decision Support Organization where I was hired to backfill a departed Project Manager on an already ongoing project by IBM, and when I read the contract I saw that IBM actually had no deliverables. I renegotiated that, trading away some tricky individualized user interface work which made the end users more happy to help, for a defined handshake and equipment spec, to implement the first warehouse use of barcoding and RFID technology at GE Power. The hiring manager was so impressed he found a way to pay me the moneys he could not agree to up-front because his budget was fixed, for which I assure you he was the most ethical hiring manager I have ever dealt with. He simply used a guy, Chris Trow, with another project to "hire" my services to "join him for a periodic beer" so he could at least SEEM like I did something time wise.

That two years led almost seven years later to a five year stint doing something totally unrelated, but for the same guy; Dick Coffin, who now had the Global Sourcing Quality Engineers. Although I had never even SEEN the equipment involved, he said his prime need was for an ability to understand a contract and ask vendors to prove how they satisfied them. So I tripped all over the planet on GE's dime, and it was the best gig I EVER had. Were it not for the collapse of Enron in 2002, which was 40% of GE's business, I might still have been doing that, and might still even be married. But c'est la vie. Life is about adjusting to new realities constantly, while keeping your sanity by laughing ;-)

My job was to inspect and approve vendors and equipment for electrical grids, and I recall fondly many stories from that stint, not least was my first drive in a rental car, a BMW 528i wagon 5 speed, on the autobahn, when it started to misfire as I was simply driving along. When I glanced down I was doing 240kmh (that's 150 REAL miles per hour folks!) perfectly legally in top gear, bouncing on the rev limiter. Or the rented Opel wagon with the smoking brakes and worn tires returning from the Appenine Mountains to the gas station near Firenze Italy (Florence) only to have the mechanic shake his head and point to the diesel pump, which I had not even realized. Pretty impressive little wagon. It had been a fun ride, where instead of "trailing throttle oversteer" which causes the rear end to feel light and so slide out through turns, I got "trailing BAG oversteer" when my suitcase slammed against the inner walls of the back of the wagon to cause the car to churp in the turns. And was why I was in Montreal on 9/11 and watched the planes crash into the twin towers as it happened, trying to explain to the French speaking techs how I knew that was an act of war. Then trying to get BACK to Syracuse afterwards, because the border had been closed, since the terrorists had COME thru Canada.

Truthfully, however, ALL my projects during my career, probably EXCEPT for FelPro, were both fun and successful, and allowed me to learn. Like the day I was in Indiana with my new 993 Cabrio, surrounded by "good old boys" monster trucks and muscle cars, when a dad and his son glanced as I was parked for breakfast. When I asked the boy if he knew what it was, I was staggered to hear "Porsche 993 Cabriolet". So I offered a ride if the dad would agree, and his son and I enjoyed what god and the good Dr Porsche made for us – a way to experience heaven right here. The boy was beaming from ear to ear, just as I did after most of my projects ;-)

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