

# Computer program offers easy way to uniformity

Pittsburgh Business Times - by [Patty Tascarella](#)

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**StarFlite Systems Inc.** is a custom manufacturer of steel enclosures such as crane operator cabs and small buildings.

"Custom" is the key word as these finished products vary by configuration, windows, doors, shape, length, width, how they're heated and air-conditioned. So StarFlite has never done the same thing twice in its 18-year history.

Unfortunately, that included drafting proposals to customers. Anyone could fill them out any which way they chose. There was plenty of work to pursue, and as StarFlite grew, it seemed more important to simply land and complete projects instead of streamlining the contract process. But by 2004, CEO Bob Daquelente faced the fact that this lack of organization was hurting business.



Joe Wojcik

Bob Daquelente of StarFlite Systems had a hard time getting consistent pricing until the company began using a computer program.

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"Imagine if you were building a house and went around the foundation and counted the studs it would take to go around the outside and then the walls inside," Daquelente said. "You might miss a wall or a partition. That's what was going on."

Employees didn't figure costs the same way.

"The sales staff wasn't as detail-oriented as the production staff," Daquelente said.

But both groups of employees figured costs and pitched customers. Sometimes, clients received different information on a project's estimate and also final cost. StarFlite sometimes had to eat its mistakes.

"It doesn't sound like a lot, but we're a small company," Daquelente said. "Variances (before) could run as much as 10 percent. On a \$75,000 job, that adds up."

Worse, time was wasted as employees tried to figure out what a job would cost when they could have been building or cold calling.

That's not an uncommon situation for companies like StarFlite whose hallmark is customization, said Art Boni, director of the Jones Center for Entrepreneurship at **Carnegie Mellon University**.

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"They're what I'd call a one-off company," Boni said. "That model is difficult to scale. Every time you're doing something, you're re-doing it. You have to replicate things fairly seamlessly."

StarFlite decided it needed a cost-estimating system so the company could develop a price package quickly and effectively. But Daquelente balked at the \$70,000 to \$100,000 price tags on software.

Moreover, Daquelente doesn't consider himself the most tech-savvy executive and was concerned that StarFlite would waste money on a system he and most of his employees wouldn't choose to use.

But the solution came from within. StarFlite staffers decided to develop a menu-type system of the various components, and Gene Desabato, a senior project manager, put this information into Microsoft Excel and made it simple for everyone to use.

"They even taught me how to use it," Daquelente quipped.

Almost all of the \$6,000 cost was employee time.

"It's helped us become more competitive ... and consistent on our pricing," Daquelente said.

The system figures costs to within about 2 percent. Daquelente credits it with increasing sales by one-third, bumping up to \$3 million.

Boni said it was a smart move for StarFlite.

"The more efficient you can be at what you do and use those tools over and over, the better you'll be," Boni said.



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