

RECONFIGURING REFRIGERATED WORKSPACES



Design/build firms seek solutions for pandemic modifications.

By Keith Loria

As the coronavirus pandemic spread throughout the world this spring, those in the cold chain industry experienced many of the same problems that other industries were facing, needing to keep workers safe, and developing a strategy to continue working in a post-COVID-19 world.

This obviously brought about many challenges and new ways of thinking about the work these companies do.

Brian King, Owner and President of A M King, notes given the impact COVID-19 has

had upon the food industry, the company is now evaluating how it can assist food processing and food distribution companies as they face the new challenge of keeping their workforce safe from the spread of this virus.

“We are developing solutions to reconfigure existing facilities to provide separation, distancing and operational modifications,” he says. “We are also working with clients in the design of new facilities to accommodate the workplace requirements now necessary to maintain the type of safe environment that was not a major consideration just a few weeks ago.”

Carsten Thorsen, CEO of CT-Technologies in Denmark, notes things have certainly been challenging, explaining several of its construction sites in Asia were closed due to local lockdowns, and being stuck at home meant not being able to travel and meet with clients and



Construction sites in Asia began to reopen in early June. (Photo courtesy of CT-Technologies.)

the majority of its work is considered essential, business hasn't been impacted greatly as most clients are keen to carry on.

"Pre-COVID, we were facing a challenging time, with a full order book and possible issues with lack of resources," he says. "The pandemic has actually evened out our workload, with some sites closing and others being pushed back."

Clift had been concerned about potential problems with cash flow, believing that some clients may use the crisis as an excuse to delay payments. He says even though this has occurred to some degree, other clients are desperate to keep sites going and have made prompt payment.

Michael Lynch, Vice President of Engineering for United States Cold Storage, oversees the construction projects when US Cold has new warehouses built and has seen several changes to operations.

The company had confirmed cases of COVID-19 among its employees, but was proactive in putting together a business continuity plan and working through ways of testing and monitoring to keep employees safe in its warehouses.

"Fortunately, it's been business as usual," Lynch says. "It's taken up a lot of time and resources in the procurement of PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) and facilitating a lot of protocols and procedures that we have in place of local management teams, who have done an exemplary job of managing this pandemic."

The company has been aided by receiving more than 50,000 masks through FEMA and installed temperature sensor devices at its warehouses early on. It also set up a clinic in its Pennsylvania facility so employees can get tested for the COVID-19 virus.

Adopting Best Practices

Prior to the pandemic, jobsite safety had a primary focus of keeping workers safe from physical injury. Now A M King's projects provide an equal level of attention to keeping its workforce safe from the spread of COVID-19.

"We start with training and communication among the project workforce," King says. "We ensure our workforce understands the newly developed best practices that must be implemented by every individual. Then we ensure that proper PPE and materials are available as

needed."

Clift notes operating procedures on-site have been largely determined by clients, as GPL Construction predominantly work on their sites. However, through building a culture of a combined and proactive approach to health and safety in the workplace, GPL has been able to implement changes to site procedures quickly and effectively.

"Keeping the size of our teams small and not having a regular turnover of staff have made implementing isolation on-site relatively easy," he says. "We have had to arrange separate toilet and washing facilities for our sole use on some sites, where there are concerns over the existing facilities, and we have had to make changes to sequencing of work to avoid other trades."

Martijn Baartmans, Director of B-Built BV in the Netherlands, notes the company has implemented new safety procedures at all of its sites to maintain a safe working environment. This includes improving sanitary facilities, updating working procedures and providing safe working distances and as much comfort as possible for site employees.

"It's about understanding the work we do, involving our staff in setting up the required guidelines and sharing our knowledge," he says. "It has to come from the inside as much as possible, and is a strict and directed top to bottom strategy."

Working globally, CT-Technologies has followed all individual country recommendations.

"The last couple of weeks, all staff have been back in our Danish office keeping distance, washing hands often and sanitizing using alcohol," Thorsen says. "Office cleaning has increased. Our office in BiH started with 50 percent of staff in one day and 50 percent the next day."

At US Cold, Lynch says they have implemented temperature monitoring for all employees and prohibited any type of travel since early on in the pandemic. Going forward, employees will only travel if considered, and with approval from company leadership.

"We've practiced social distancing and masks are required," he says. "Any visitor that comes on-site is required to fill out a questionnaire and affidavit, following CDC guidelines. We put in place weekly calls with our senior management team that includes

subsidiaries. Plus, a couple of the company's European suppliers closed their factories and shipping costs skyrocketed.

"We mainly have suppliers from Europe and a couple of our Italian and Spanish suppliers were closed for a couple of weeks," he says. "The main challenge has been a lack of containers for shipping our projects and also a lack of air freight for shipping urgent spare parts."

CT-Technologies is now focusing more on having local supply options instead of having to ship all products from Europe.

"We are having more web-based meetings to keep the international team together, but it's still very important to meet in person," Thorsen says.

GPL Construction in the United Kingdom is a specialty contractor working in the food industry either for the end-user directly or their nominated building contractor. Peter Clift, owner of the company, says that since

all warehouse general managers, so we can discuss pandemic changes, state re-openings and active cases. We also answer any questions they may have.”

On-Going Projects

While some cold storage design-build projects that had been started were halted, and others about to begin were put on hold, many companies still went forward with what was planned and already in the works.

“A M King has been fortunate as each of our projects was allowed to proceed,” King says. “We were also fortunate that we were able to respond by keeping every project moving forward, albeit in a different manner than before this crisis occurred. We started by working with our clients to understand and communicate their intentions for each of their projects and the protocols and modifications required on each individual project.”

Additionally, the company set up a channel of internal communication to address every new development during the crisis, and how, as an organization, it should respond to these developments. By over-communicating and facing every new challenge head-on, the company was able to develop solutions to maintain project productivity and project safety.

According to Thorsen, most of CT-Technologies’ construction sites in Indonesia, Philippines and Singapore have been closed by their respective governments. As of early June, things were starting to open and work was expected to begin again.

B-Built BV has seen a decrease in the company’s monthly revenues due to a significant “slow-down” on all projects, though it has not been a complete stop.

“We are being flexible and keeping a dialogue going with all stakeholders involved – clients, partners, subcontractors – and maintaining a common goal as much as possible,” Baartmans says. “We maintain our trust in the food business, that’s for sure, but perhaps with a slightly adjusted approach to create a broader view.”

Lessons Learned

With COVID-19 being an unprecedented virus, companies are figuring out how to best work and adapt to ensure people are safe and work can still get done.

“We have learned to expect the unexpected,” King says. “Those of us who have been in the design and construction industry for many years expect to face challenges such as recessions, labor shortages or shifting markets. But no one would have anticipated an event such as this to occur. It reminds us to be flexible, and to always be prepared to respond quickly to unexpected challenges.” ☎

KEITH LORIA is an award-winning journalist who has been writing for major newspapers and magazines for close to 20 years, on topics as diverse as sports, business and technology.

EMAIL: freelancekeith@gmail.com