

Improve Group takes on inventory storage challenges

BY DENNIS DOMRZALSKI | SPECIAL TO NMBW

Sometimes the best business strategy is to stop trying to be everything to all people and focus on the one or couple of things you're really good at.

Changing the company's name to more accurately reflect what you're in the business of doing can help. So can revamping its policies, procedures and processes so that every employee does the same thing every time for each job.

Those three strategies have been working for the Albuquerque-based Improve Group, a company that specializes in helping government agencies, the military and other companies more efficiently and safely store their inventory or records and manage their electronic records.

Since clearly focusing on its core competency in 2004 and changing its name in January 2007 from Western Office Systems, Improve Group has seen its revenues grow to \$11.4 million annually from \$8 million. The company has grown from 38 employees to 52.

During that time, it has expanded into Colorado and Wyoming and helped army bases, hospitals, museums, universities, libraries and a host of city, county state and federal agencies better manage their paper and electronic records.

VITAL STATISTICS

Company Name: Improve Group

Type of Business: Designing and installing high-density, mobile storage systems and managing electronic storage systems.

Year founded: 1976

Annual revenues: \$11.4 million

Employees: 52

President: Marvin Procter

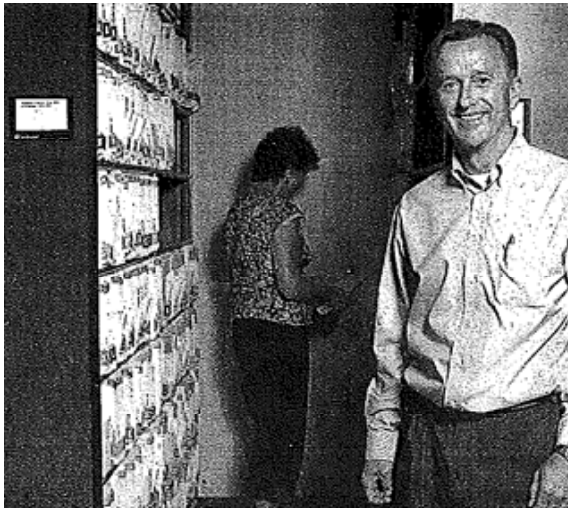
Key strategies: Focus on what it does best (storage and management), rename company to reflect core mission, and restructure to help employees do their best work.

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Improve Group uses high-density and retractable shelving and storage systems manufactured by the Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin based Spacesave Corp., America's leading manufacturer of high-density, mobile storage units. The company makes shelving units now found in libraries and courthouses everywhere, shelves that are mounted on floor tracks that can be rolled into one another to save space. For instance, a 9-by-6-foot area of mobile shelving can store as much paper as 20 four-drawer filing cabinets.

It was a couple of years ago that Improve Group President and chief problem solver Marvin Procter decided it was time to focus on what the company did best.

"Two years ago, 25 percent of our business was office furniture, and we were at the records and information management and storage side," Procter says. "We purposely withdrew from that market.

"Back in the day, we would hang our hat on the fact that we could walk into a business and say, 'Gosh, we can do anything you want. We can get you a chair. We can get you a desk. We can get you a filing cabinet.' Well, the world has changed, and information management has become much more complex, and it is difficult today to be a jack of all trades and a master of none."

The company also decided to refocus on getting its employees to do what they do best.

"We used to have our sales people do a lot of detail work as far as managing projects and managing the implementation of the solution, and it distracted them from doing the diagnosis," Procter says. "It also prevented us from making sure a project was 100 percent detailed. So now we have a Project Management Department that manages the details and the logistics, and the sales people, and the project management people are free to do what they are best at."

Improve Group doesn't just plop down mobile shelving and install records management software. Its employees take the time to understand how a company or agency uses its records, and that goes a long way to designing the optimal records storage and management system. A job the company recently completed for the U.S. Army at Fort Carson, Colo., is an example of how it works.

"Every military installation and law enforcement agency – the Border Patrol, police forces – they all have armories where they store their shotguns, their rifles, their machine guns," Procter says, adding that storage requirements change when new weapons come on line. "Spacesaver makes a universal weapons rack where the interior can be reconfigured as the military's weapons change."

Procter's son, Matt, another of Improve Group's problem solvers, explains how the company actually listens to its customers.

"The benefit we can bring is an understanding of how a unit works with those weapons before we go in and implement a solution." The younger Procter says, "They might store their rifles in one area and pistols in another area, and all the extra pistols in another area, and all the extra equipment like the communications gear, and night-vision goggles in another area.

"If we understand how they issue and return that material, we can design a system around that. Maybe this is Special Forces unit where each person gets a long rifle, a pistol and three separate pieces of equipment. We can store all that stuff together so instead of giving them a rifle here and then having them run over there to get something else, we can keep everything for one guy in one rack.

"The real benefit is that now, because of the way we organize and think through their process, we can make it to where one guy issues weapons to an entire company as opposed to it taking three guys."

Improve Group began life in 1976. It had been the division office for Remington Rand Filing Systems. But Remington Rand sold its filing systems division in the 1970s and Improve Group was incorporated as Western Office Systems.

Marvin Procter joined the company in 1980 as a sales representative. In 2000, company founder Sheridan Fuss retired, and Procter bought out his interest. Matt Procter began working for the company in 1999.

Improve Group doesn't do a lot of advertising, says its marketing director Michelle Leslie. The firm's reputation in the Albuquerque area and word-of-mouth referrals have kept it growing.

The firm does, however, have an individual who spends 20 hours a week making cold calls by telephone and tracking down leads for its sales personnel.

"Our plan is to do a lot more electronic marketing and a lot more targeted and focused marketing where we will identify a particular territory in a particular industry, and then we will try to get information to them via email," Leslie says. "Our ultimate goal is to get the appointment and to get the sales rep in front of them because that is the only way we can help get their business better organized."

Ruth Dygert, facilities manager for the Magistrate Division of the New Mexico State Court System, says she has been dealing with Improve Group for the past three years and that it has helped the 53 magistrate courts get control of their enormous paper-storage challenges.