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Data power

Hitachi Computer Products (America) makes a range of data storage systems for its parent and for other customers, Ruari McCallion reports

The Hitachi name is familiar from a range of products and in a range of industries, from ATM cash dispensers through consumer electronics and rail transportation to power generation. But a major business of Hitachi in North America is mid- and large-scale computer data storage systems: the Oklahoma Manufacturing Division (Hitachi OMD), at Norman, OK, is a key element in those activities.

“Hitachi Computer Products (America) was incorporated in 1985 and we started manufacturing early in 1987,” says Allen Ahlert, director of operations. “We currently have around 300 employees; we have had more but we’ve automated some processes and reduced our labor content.” Automation reduces labor input but it also freezes the process in place, whether it’s good or bad. How does Hitachi OMD ensure that it doesn’t fall into the trap of exchanging flexibility for short-term labor gain?

“PCB production is highly automated and that allows us to reduce variations and improve quality,” Ahlert says. “Our products aren’t suited for a great deal of automation, as they’re large scale and complex. We only build a few every day.” So Hitachi OMD practices the mantra of automating wherever practical and retaining the flexibility and adaptability of trained human beings where that is beneficial.

A promotional banner for the 2005 Lean manufacturing survey. The top half features the year '2005' in large, semi-transparent grey letters over a background of industrial machinery. Below this, the text 'Lean manufacturing survey' is written in a bold, red, sans-serif font. The bottom half of the banner has a solid orange background with the text 'The results are in...' in white, followed by 'Click here to download your FREE copy of the 2005 Lean manufacturing survey results' in a smaller white font. At the very bottom, it says 'Sponsored by ORACLE' with the Oracle logo in red.

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The large-scale products Hitachi OMD manufactures are mainframe disk drive storage systems. Its main customer is Hitachi Data Systems. Hitachi OMD has also expanded its manufacturing capabilities to include contract manufacturing. “In 1999, we decided to leverage the capability at the Hitachi OMD facility to provide contract manufacturing, and we actively pursue customers outside the Hitachi envelope,” says Shawn Hook, marketing sales coordinator. It secured its first third-party contract in early 1999, and that part of the business has continued to grow.

“We focused on several different industries that fit around our capabilities: electronics, of course; medical and industrial security are three main sectors, but we are interested in considering business that requires electronics, assemblies, and sub-assemblies,” Hook says. The company has also moved into mid-range storage equipment and offers more than manufacturing. “We have a range of unique services we can provide. We have engineering capability and can call on electrical, mechanical, quality assurance, and engineering resources to design new products and redesign existing lines to make them more manufacturable and reliable.” As part of a large company, Hitachi OMD brings to the table the benefits of global-scale purchasing. But that isn’t the heart of its contracting offer.

“The advantage of the OMD offering is the totality of the package,” Hook continues. “As well as our design and manufacturing capability, we have logistics and transportation services in place.” Hitachi OMD and Hitachi Transport Systems (America), Ltd. are registered with the US Customs program Customs Trade Partners Against Terrorism (CTPAT). With this registration, Customs has committed to provide an entry process marked

by the efficient release of goods and the prompt resolution of any outstanding issues affecting Customs processing of shipments.

“Large RAID systems have a lot of built-in redundancy but larger customers, such as banks, finance companies, and government agencies store and manage large amounts of data, and they need access to it all the time,” says Joe Soliz, Test Engineering Manager. “They may also use mid-size systems because they want to keep particular functions, or satellite offices, separate.” A number of larger organizations also use disk-based systems for backup, which may be more cost efficient and more accessible than tape-rotating solutions. The latest Hitachi large-scale product has total storage capacity up to 332 terabytes, two million I/Os per second and 81 GB/second aggregate internal bandwidth. The Thunder unit is scaleable from desk-side storage to rack systems; The Lightning product provides capacity from

17.5 to 147.5 terabytes and can be paired with Thunder in tiered environments for such applications as content distribution, backup, data archiving, and compliance. And compliance is a subject on quite a few minds right now, with the advent of the European Union’s Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) and Restriction of Hazardous Substances (RoHS) directives. WEEE is already in place in most of the EU countries and extends to them all on August 13 this year; RoHS takes effect in July 2006, which is a short time in product lifecycles.

“Our main products are already RoHS-compliant: We started moving to lead-free solder, for example, in 1998,” Ahlert says. “We have a sister facility in France and our head office is in Japan, which has similar codes of practice to the EU’s legislation, and we’ve undertaken a lot of research in hazardous substances.” The time it has under its belt already has enabled Hitachi OMD to develop effective and reliable lead-free solders. Reliability and efficiency in its processes are also priorities.

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