Kurt's clinic

Kurt Hertzog answers some readers' questions

Large-quantity orders

Question: I've been turning and selling pens for a while and just landed an order for 250. I am very excited but worry I don't I have the capacity to accomplish it in the timeframe the customer has specified. Any suggestions what I can do to help with large-quantity orders?

Answer: I'm wondering why you would accept an order for a quantity and delivery that you knowingly believe you can't successfully meet. It has the makings of a potential late delivery, lesser than usual quality, transition from enjoyment in the shop to dread, poor private and public reviews of you (and your company), and more.

A couple of immediate suggestions… If you believe this is a train wreck in the making, contact the customer and negotiate a delayed/staggered delivery or some other alterations in their order that will allow for success. Other than a large gift giving, single event or multi-store initial stocking order, there may not be a need for the entire large quantity at once. You also have the option to subcontract some quantity or facets of your order to fellow turners. That potentially removes some of your profit margins. I'm assuming that turning (no pun intended) a profit is your reason for taking this order.

Another pitfall of subcontracting is that it reduces your immediate control of quality. However, it might allow you to be successful, save face, and make appropriate plans for future large-quantity orders. Barring negotiating smaller-quantity, staggered deliveries, you can always reject the order and provide whatever excuse you wish. Inability to obtain sufficient materials, problems with equipment, worker availability, or some similar excuse might work. The unhappy customer response it might create now could be better than potentially a more vociferous one later.

On improving throughput efficiency for this order or future projects, there are several suggestions I can make. Set up your process that is tailored to work well in batches and efficient-sized quantities at each stage. Cutting, drilling, gluing, facing, turning, sanding/finish prep, finishing, assembly, and packaging are the typical major stages of this kind of project. Each can be organised in a 'manufacturing' mentality. You can set up your equipment with jigs and fixtures that allow for faster, more uniform, easily repeated work. It also allows you to enlist additional workers that

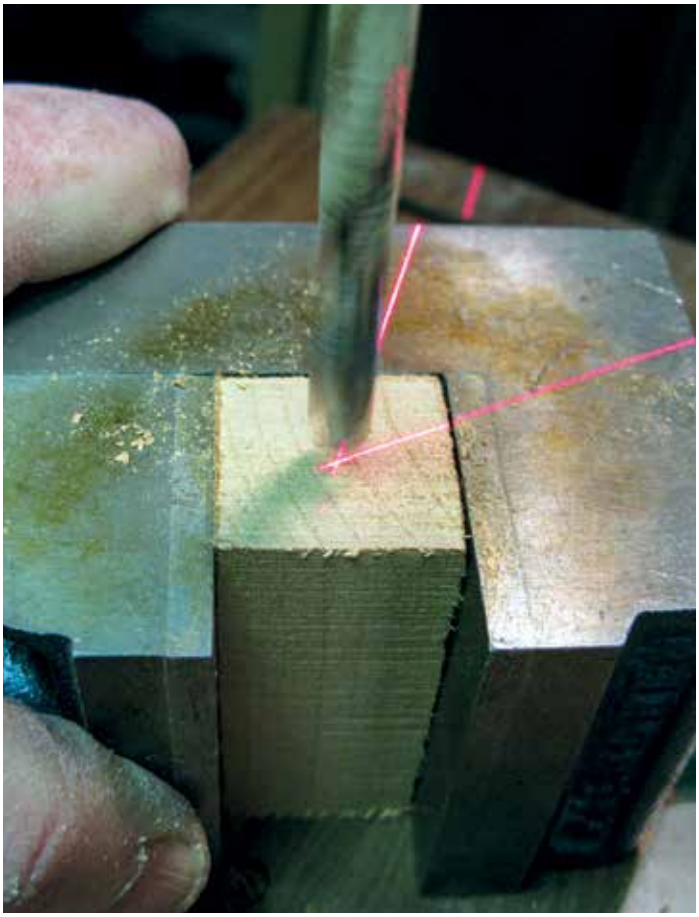
Jigs and figures can be as simple as setting a proper length cut off clamp on the bandsaw. Set it for minimal excess needed for barrel trimming, and yet a non-turner can process blanks

Set up your process to work in efficient sized batches. You don't need all 250 blanks sitting in a pile waiting for turning. Only enough to keep ahead of the turner. (My prep for upcoming classes)

can work in parallel with you. For example, if you are the turner/finisher worker, family, friends, or short-term contract help can be doing processes that are essentially robotic in nature. Jigs or fixtures properly set so that errors can be eliminated (or at least minimised) allows you to use virtually anyone available with minimal training and supervision. You won't need to have 250 ready-to-turn blanks in front of you all at once. While you are at work, someone else or others can be performing the necessary work in smaller batch sizes. They only need to keep sufficient ready to turn product in front of you continually.

Setting up batch processing allows for work to continue 'around the clock' by others, so progress can be made at any hour even if you aren't at the lathe turning. Of course, you can pre-build and stock any common parts or sub-assemblies. This works well if your orders are of a certain design or species. Even having your blanks cut, drilled, glued, and faced with your most ordered tube size makes fulfilment far faster. Tubes for any kit are available as an independent part, letting you get ahead of some of the mundane work. Good luck with your current large order, whether you get timing or staged delivery relief, cancel it, or somehow tough through it.

Since I don't sell my work, my needs for batches are for classes, articles, or donations. Even then, my quantities are manageable



I've equipped my drill press with a laser marker that indicates the drill starting location. Not too expensive and certainly a time saver for any drilling needs

Nearly all pen-making processes, properly setup, can be easily taught to an assistant, allowing you to focus on whatever aspect you wish

Noisy lathe

Question: I'm getting noise from my lathe when I'm turning larger work. Smaller turnings don't seem to cause any issues but larger blanks seem to make the noise, but only sometimes. Do you have any ideas on what might be the cause? How do I fix it?

Answer: There are several things that might be the cause of your noise. You don't indicate what sort of noise it is, how loud, if it varies with rpm, and some other things that might help narrow it down. Let me give you what comes to mind.

From your information, I'm guessing the noise is coming from the bearings in the headstock. You might be simply putting too much stress on the headstock spindle and bearings with your workholding. Off centre, too heavy, or excessive speeds on mounted work can also make tired bearings whine or squeal a bit. For larger, heavier turnings between centres, most of us tend to really cinch up the tailstock more forcefully. Any excessive pressure on the headstock might be making weary and worn bearings complain to you. You say lighter work doesn't cause any problems. Over-tightening doesn't add any value. Be safe but only use sufficient force to keep the blank secure and safe to turn, allowing it to drive properly. You may find that you won't have any noise.

When you do get the noise, check the headstock area and spindle for heat. It probably will be warm but the heat shouldn't be excessive. You may want to start your search for replacement bearings. They really aren't expensive and can usually be replaced by the end user. The manufacturer's manual probably has a parts breakdown and a replacement part(s) number. You can get the bearings from them or, if you can find the OEM bearing part number, you can order it from another source. Not as an endorsement but for example, I've ordered and received high-quality, replacement of industry standard bearings in one day from Amazon at very competitive pricing ($7.00 total cost).

Your owner's manual should show a breakdown of the headstock and how the bearings can be accessed. If you don't feel comfortable doing the work, I'm sure you'll have a capable friend in the club or acquaintance that can be enlisted. The person helping you need not be a turner or familiar with shop equipment. They need only be mechanically oriented and able to understand the drawings.

Not a lathe bearing but for example, without any premium the replacement for a problem bearing crippling my bandsaw operation was ordered online and in hand for installation the next day

With only typical shop tools, a handy person can knock out and properly press in replacement bearings with minimal tools. If this doesn't seem workable for you, find a local machine shop that will do the work for you if you bring them the headstock, assuming it is a bigger lathe. Mini lathes could be delivered for this work complete. You can also contact the lathe manufacturer's service department for guidance, recommendations, and any specific cautions. They likely have talked customers through the process in the past. While I don't recommend it, you certainly have the option of living with the noise, minimising it by how and what you turn, until the bearings give up. At that point, you only have the replacement option.

Favourite brand of CA

Question: It seems that my local woodturning dealer will no longer be carrying my favourite CA adhesive, or at least not getting any in stock for a while. Any suggestions as to what brand to switch to for CA finishes? What is your favourite brand?

Answer: If you can't buy your usual brand locally, I'm wondering if your retailer can ship from its online or corporate locations. If you have tried that and need to source somewhere else, you can always try to buy online from the wealth of online dealers. I've slightly altered the wording of your question to remove your dealer name and brand because it isn't pertinent. I'm also avoiding a specific brand recommendation. Personally, used properly I've found that any brand of fresh, quality CA will work well as an adhesive and finishing product. That said, I obviously have a favourite brand that I try to use but I recommend you select your own. Reducing variability in any aspect of your process helps with uniformity and repeatability. If you select a new brand, you may wish to try a few different ones before you settle on one. Of course, availability both short term and long term should be a large factor in your selection. As you do your search, you can always poll your turning friends and other club members for their input. You can probably borrow a few different brands from them for a simple trial as part of your selection process. A saying that I probably include too often is especially true here too. The magic is never in the tools, it is in the hands of the user.

Send your questions to Kurt's email: kurt@kurthertzog.com