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E3 - latest CNC technology

Based in Onehunga, Auckland, DH Kitchens has been one of the first of a growing wave of joinery shops around the country to receive the latest CNC technology. Standing proudly on a raised section of his workshop, owner Jack Feng's new E3 certainly stands out - a stylish yet sturdy machine befitting the marketing slogan that accompanies it: "setting a new standard in nesting."

Jack Feng started DH Kitchens in August last year with a Robland panel saw and Brandt edgbander. With more than six years' experience in a joinery shop and an equally experienced colleague keen to join him he had decided it was time to branch out with his own business. Jack's business plan for DH Kitchens allowed for a slow start up over 3 years, with a focus on producing quality work in the workshop to ensure smooth installs – and therefore happy customers. But just two months from start-up Jack found demand for his kitchens far exceeding workshop capacity. With a new relationship with a large builder and some big contracts on the way he decided he needed to move to nesting with a CNC machine – more than two years earlier than the business plan suggested.

Jack settled on the new E3 – the latest machine from the AscentPro range built to Jacks' specifications. With a 9.5kW Italian spindle, Italian FAM drilling head, 8 slot rotary tool-change magazine, Japanese and German guide and rail systems and compatibility with all popular design-to-machine software packages in NZ, the E3 sets a very high standard of specifications for this level of CNC.

Jack explains the reasoning behind his purchase. "Our plan is to target the mid to high end of the kitchen market in Auckland, particularly within the Chinese community" he says. "To achieve this I need to establish a reputation for quality, speed and reliability. So far my machines from Jacks have helped me do this, so when I saw the E3 and the level of componentry I would get for the price, I had no hesitation."

Jack was already familiar with the PRO100 software package, and so opted to bundle it with his E3 purchase, although as part of his training he focused on the capabilities of the CAD/CAM package ASPAN that takes PRO100 designs and converts them to machine language. "As well as a reputation for quality I want to establish a specific style for DH Kitchens" Jack explains. "To do so we need to use the CNC for more than just cutting cabinets, but also to create patterned doors, recessed handles and other finishing touches that distinguish our work" he says.

Developing a distinct style fits well with Jack's kitchen design methods. "We talk to the customer about what they want, but while visiting for the measure up we also look at how the kitchen will fit into the customer's style. I look at how customers live, how they cook, what else they do in that area of the house, and how our kitchen will look from the sofa. Because today a kitchen is more than just a place for cooking – it's part of someone's style. Some customers want to update their kitchen as often as their mobile phone, and we need to work with that."

As DH Kitchens moved into production mode the E3 quickly established its credentials. "Installation was mid November, and by Christmas we'd turned out 35 kitchens" says Jack. "I'd been holding customers back for a while, convincing them that the quality of finish from the CNC would be worth the wait. So we had to catch up with orders quickly."

One of the factors that Jack claims helped this fast turnaround are the 3 pop-up stops – just one of many features that come as standard on the E3. "The stops make loading the panel so much faster. No messing around trying to line the panel up with the table" says Jack. When combined with the time-savings from bank drilling, a hand held controller, as well as the E3's general ease of operation, Jack and his team are now working far more efficiently.

"Nesting on the E3 has vastly improved our production speed and improved accuracy, and therefore ease of construction on site" says Jack. "For some things – producing cutouts for recessed handles for example – we've gone from 40 minutes down to just 1 minute."

Given how quickly Jack has outperformed his initial business plan it's no surprise that he's already thinking about expansion. Limitation of space is one factor to be considered, and he's wary about growing too fast. "So far word-of-mouth has worked well for us, so we need to keep up that reputation while increasing our output at the top of the market" Jack explains.

With a second designer contracted and a couple of installers now on board, DH Kitchens remains focused on maintaining their quality while slowly growing their market share.

Well, the business plan still says "slowly" ...



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