

Who moved my pencil?

By Janet Gordon



The requirements to process an invoice for payment in the accounts payable department have always been the same. The unit price on the invoice must match the unit price on the purchase order. The quantity on the invoice must match the quantity on the completed receiver. I'm sure this process was the same for Yaskawa Electric America in 1992, although it would be many years before I joined the finance department.

In early 1993, I quit working to become a full-time mom. Something amazing happened while I was changing diapers and planning play dates: The accounting profession as I had known it started to become automated. While the three-way match process was the same, the method was now quite different. Everything was handled on the computer.

Twelve years later, and now with two children, I decided to go back to work. I had played a little bit with Microsoft Excel while I was at home, but I certainly didn't have up-to-date skills in Excel and had never heard of SAP software, which Yaskawa Electric America uses. I went on two interviews. The first one was doing accounts payable while answering the phones, and I knew I didn't want that job. The second interview was with Yaskawa, a local company I had never heard of.

Right after the Yaskawa interview, I knew I wanted to work there. I liked the company's way of thought, its policies and procedures, and the people I met. One roadblock stood in my way: I had to take an Excel test. I did my best but felt like I had bombed it. I told the assistant controller that if she was going to be making her decision solely on the test results, then I should be looking for a different place to work. The strangest thing happened. Yaskawa offered me the job. It turns out one of the things the company prides itself in is honesty, and the management felt you couldn't get any more honest than my reaction to my performance on that Excel test.

I remember my first day at work. Besides feeling nervous being around so many people over the age of 10, I remember being confused that I couldn't find a pencil to save my life. After working at Yaskawa for five years now, I still get teased about this. I was told I wouldn't need a pencil because Excel would do all the work for me.

They were right. I didn't need a pencil—or the paper receivers and purchase orders I had worked with in the past. I just had to enter the information from the invoice into the computer and the software took care of the rest. I was thrilled.

But there was still one aspect of the accounting world I hated. We had boxes and boxes of paid invoices we had to keep for the auditors. When an auditor asked to see a payment, I had to hunt for the invoice and hope it was filed in the correct location. About three years ago, my boss introduced me to something that would change how I did my job again: Invoice scanning. It's an

amazing process. The invoice is placed into the scanner and an image is converted into SAP.

Although you still have to make sure you have the very important three-way match, a picture of the invoice is now in the computer for anyone to inspect and print.

This has made the year-end audit almost enjoyable, if there is such a thing. Now when the auditor requests a specific invoice, I just have to pull up the image and print it. If a vendor calls and wonders why an invoice was short-paid, I can look at the image and any notes that were given to me by the buyer that would explain the difference in the amount paid.

More invoices can now be processed more efficiently. This allows the AP analyst to produce more work but also take advantage of discounts vendors offer for faster payments. Usually the AP department is not considered a revenue-generating part of an organization, but by taking advantage of discounts, we can now contribute to the company's bottom line in a positive way.

My hope for the future is that Yaskawa's vendors can send their invoices directly to SAP. Currently we still have to open mail or print e-mailed copies of the invoices. Just imagine how much more time could be saved with the endless automation possibilities that exist for our profession. ●

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