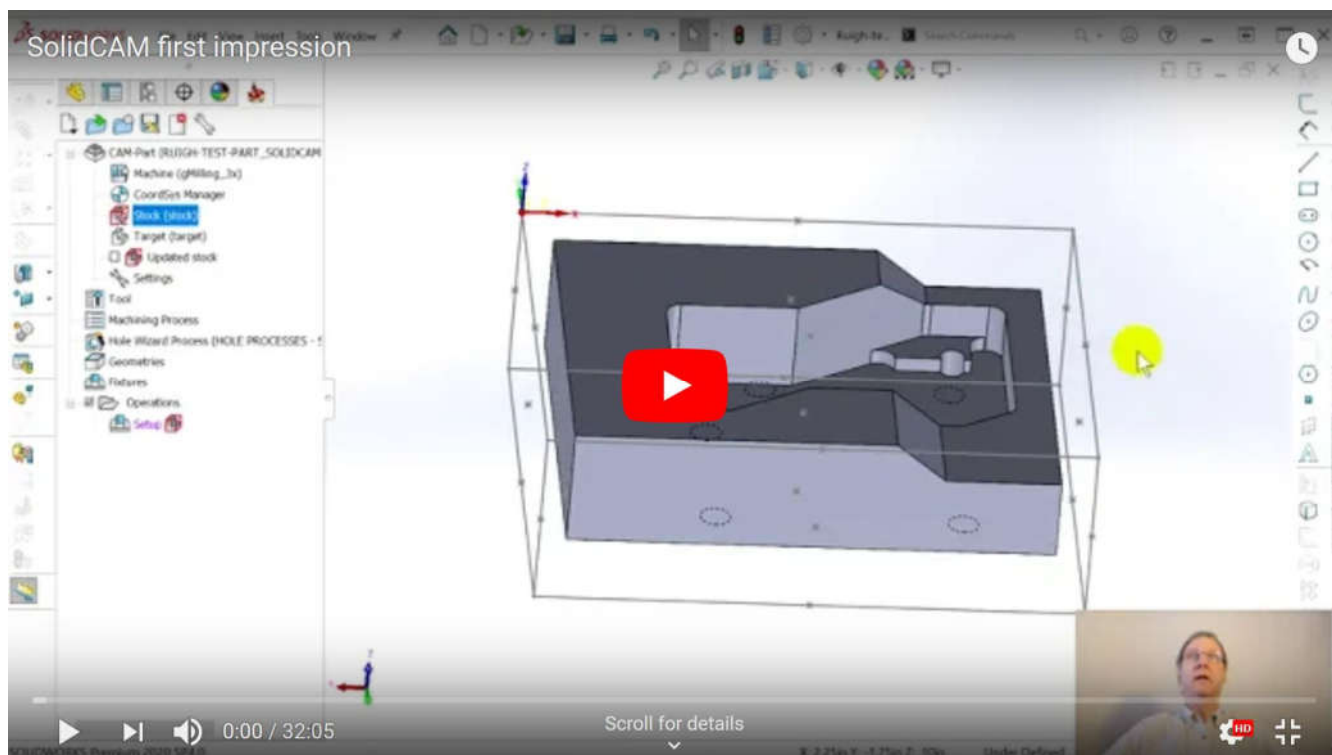




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SolidCAM first impression

SolidCAM has a complicated user interface. I love the support and the company, but hate the lack of an intuitive UI.



Beginning part file here.
Finished part file here.

I really want to love SolidCAM. The company has been very helpful. Their support is fantastic. They gave me a full working trial for two months. They have a great website and tutorial videos

My problem is that I need the support and the videos because the program is so convoluted and hard to use. It's better than MasterCAM, but that is faint praise. The dialog box buttons are complex, confusing, and worst of all, unlabeled. You have to hover the mouse over them to remind you of all the things that the buttons can do.

Like with MasterCAM, there were things I did the day before I forgot how to do the very next day. My problem is that I am an intermittent user, an engineer that will be using the software occasionally. If I was a CAM programmer at a machine shop, I could see being able to memorize what all the little icons mean that do various actions. I am not so sure I could remember any of them after a month away from the program.

I contrast this program and MasterCAM with VisualMill by MecSoft. VisualMill makes it obvious what you have to do, and how to do it. It does not have MasterCAM's "planes" or SolidCAM's "coordinate systems". Setting up the stock is a breeze in VisualMill.

I must not do think like a real machinist. For instance, I want part-zero to be on the back left corner of the stock. That is the point I can use the tool-probe in my Avid Benchtop Pro milling machine to set the G54 offset to work zero. But the program makes it very clumsy to get this accomplished. Other programs just let you directly set the origin to the stock.

To do this in SolidCAM, I have to set up the coordinate system first, then create the stock, then go back and set the coordinate system to the stock, then go back and enter and leave the stock dialog box so it appears where it should.

If you try to set the stock up first, it does not give the option to set the stock up by overall size, but rather, by the part size plus some incremental additions on each face. This is like SolidWorks CAM by CAMWorks. You would have to get a calculator out to add and subtract so your total stock size ends up a nice round number you can actually order from a metal supply house.

Most of the pain and complexity of the program comes at the beginning. I looked for a half-hour on where to enter the material type. This is obvious in other programs. With SolidCAM, you have to know to expand the "iMachining Data" chevron. It is there you enter material. They only have five choices for aluminum, with names like, "Aluminum_100BHN-60HRB".

I have never seen this type of designation, I don't know if it some European standard, or if BHN stands for Brinell hardness or what. I do know 6061, and A356 for castings, and other designations. Fortunately, there is a checkbox that lets you use the SolidWorks material. I had to go back to the part tree and enter the material there, but then SolidCAM would let me chose to use the SolidWorks material, which does let you choose 6061 with a T6 heat treatment.

It seems like it just so complicated to set a part zero and a material and start adding operations. Once you do get that done, adding operations is more straightforward, but still difficult.

The designers of the program have adopted that Steve Jobs mentality that having labels and text is somehow ugly and degrading. So the dialogs have 9 or 10 icons on the bottom, but a new user has no idea what they do. You have to hover your mouse over the button, and only then does text appear to tell you what it does.

Egyptian hieroglyphics and Chinese characters from 5,000 years ago are not a pictographic languages. The symbols are phonetic and symbolic and combine to make language. To get a pictographic language, you have to go back a few thousand more years, to the cuneiform of the Sumerians in ancient Mesopotamia. This is where "modern" software engineers want our society to revert to.

The other problems with the user interface is true of most of these CAM programs. They are "digital" in that there is no sense of importance in all the little buttons and boxes. There is no analog, no analogy, to the importance or centrality of the button or setting.

Plus, the settings are always spread around in 5 or 6 different dialog boxes. I always want to set type of cut, depth of cut, and number of passes, but that might be on three different dialog boxes.

The demo I took for SolidCAM stressed you can make templates of various operations. I suspect they view this like a higher-level software language. You suffer with the dialogs to make the template, and then apply that template to the part to get the results you want. That may be true, and I will look into that mode, but for now, I am having a hard time.