

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE DISTRICT OF DELAWARE

POSITRAN MANUFACTURING, INC., )  
)  
Plaintiff/Counter-Defendant, )  
)  
v. ) C.A. No. 02-466 GMS  
)  
DIEBOLD, INC., )  
)  
Defendant/Counter-Claimant.)

**MEMORANDUM AND ORDER**

**I. INTRODUCTION**

On May 31, 2002, the plaintiff, Positran Manufacturing Inc. (“Positran”), filed the above-captioned action asserting claims for breach of contract. In response, the defendant, Diebold, Inc. (“Diebold”) has asserted counterclaims for breach of contract, fraud, and unjust enrichment. A two-day bench trial is scheduled to begin on June 16, 2003.

Presently before the court is Diebold’s motion for relief from Positran’s allegedly intentional destruction of evidence. For the following reasons, the court will grant Diebold relief, albeit not in the requested form.

**II. BACKGROUND**

In the first count of its counterclaim, Diebold asserts that Positran failed to make payments to Mosler as they became due for goods tendered by Mosler under its agreement with Positran.<sup>1</sup> Positran, however, argues that this obligation was “canceled out” under a supposed oral agreement between it and Mosler to “net” that obligation against amounts Mosler allegedly owed to Postiran.

Diebold now contends that, while its discovery requests were pending, and just days before

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<sup>1</sup>Diebold subsequently purchased Mosler’s assets and accounts-receivable, including the roughly \$1.3 million account-receivable against Positran.

his deposition, Positran's Vice-President, Joseph Uhl ("Uhl"), intentionally destroyed relevant evidence. Specifically, Diebold alleges that Uhl destroyed his handwritten notes which set forth his contemporaneous account of events that are the subject of both Positran's claim and Diebold's counterclaim. This fact is not in contention because, at his July 11, 2002 deposition, Uhl admitted that, just before his deposition, he did, in fact, throw away his handwritten notes.

Diebold alleges that the destroyed notes reflected communications between Positran and Mosler regarding Mosler's product orders to Positran. According to Diebold, these communications are crucial to the issue of the scope of the implied license to make Mosler goods. Diebold further alleges that the destroyed notes contained information on the Positran-Diebold negotiations that led to the agreement upon which Positran bases its "netting" claim.

Additionally, Diebold maintains that, not only did Uhl destroy documents, he fabricated a typewritten document which was subsequently produced to Diebold in discovery. Uhl then falsely testified that the document was a verbatim, typed version of the destroyed handwritten notes. In support of its contention that this document is fraudulent, Diebold points to the following testimony taken from Uhl at his July 11, 2002 deposition. At that deposition, Uhl stated that the only documents to which he referred in creating the typed document were the handwritten notes that he destroyed. He further testified that the only difference between the documents is that, whereas the destroyed documents were handwritten, the produced document is typewritten.

Upon closer inspection of the produced document, however, Diebold noticed that it duplicates, often verbatim, excerpts from Positran's complaint. Additionally, while Uhl stated that his handwritten notes did not refer to exhibits, the typed document does refer to exhibits. Those exhibit references in turn exactly match the exhibit references in Positran's complaint.

### III. DISCUSSION

A party who has reason to anticipate litigation has an affirmative duty to preserve evidence which might be relevant to the issues in the lawsuit. *See, e.g., Howell v. Maytag*, 168 F.R.D. 502, 505 (M.D. Pa. 1996) (citing *Baliotis v. McNeil*, 870 F. Supp. 1285, 1290 (M.D. Pa. 1994)); *accord Shamis v. Ambassador Factors Corp.*, 34 F. Supp.2d 879, 888-89 (S.D.N.Y. 1999) (asking whether the party “knew or should have known that the destroyed evidence was relevant to pending, imminent, or reasonably foreseeable litigation”); *Bass v. General Motors Corp.*, 929 F. Supp. 1287, 1288 (W.D. Mo. 1996) (same). A party who breaches this duty by destroying relevant evidence or by allowing relevant evidence to be destroyed may be sanctioned by the court. *See, e.g., Howell*, 168 F.R.D. at 505; *accord TeleCom Intn’l Am. Ltd. v. AT&T Corp.*, 189 F.R.D. 76, 81 (S.D.N.Y. 1999). When this destruction is willful or in bad faith and intended to prevent the other side from examining the evidence, the court may impose the most severe sanction of them all—the outright dismissal of a claim or the entry of a default judgment. *See Turner v. Hudson Transit Lines, Inc.*, 142 F.R.D. 68, 74 (S.D.N.Y. 1991) (“[T]he even harsher sanction of default [or dismissal] may be imposed as a sanction for the intentional destruction of evidence if the party seeking the evidence has been severely prejudiced and no lesser sanction is adequate.”); *accord TeleCom*, 189 F.R.D. at 81 (noting that the sanction of dismissal is a “drastic remedy” which should be imposed only in “extreme circumstances,” such as when a party wilfully destroys evidence or otherwise acts in bad faith) (relying on *West v. Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co.*, 167 F.3d 776, 779 (2d Cir. 1999)); *Baliotis*, 870 F. Supp. at 1289 (“A sanction that has the ‘drastic’ result of judgment being entered against the party who has lost or destroyed evidence must be regarded as a ‘last resort,’ to be imposed only ‘if no alternative remedy by way of a lesser, but equally efficient, sanction is available.’”) (citations

omitted).

When determining whether to impose sanctions for the spoliation of evidence, the court must consider the following three factors:

- (1) the degree of fault and personal responsibility of the party who destroyed the evidence;
- (2) the degree of prejudice suffered by the other party; and
- (3) the availability of lesser sanctions which would avoid any unfairness to the innocent party while, at the same time, serving as a sufficient penalty to deter the same type of conduct in the future.

*See Schmid v. Milwaukee Elec. Tool Corp.*, 13 F.3d 76, 79 (3d Cir. 1994); *accord Indemnity Ins. Co. of N. Am. v. Liebert Corp.*, 1998 WL 363834, at \* 3 (S.D.N.Y. June 29, 1998).

As the *Schmid* court emphasized, when determining the degree of fault and personal responsibility attributable to the party that destroyed the evidence, the court must consider whether that party intended to impair the ability of the other side to effectively litigate its case. 13 F.3d at 80; *see also Brewer v. Quaker State Oil Refining Corp.*, 72 F.3d 326, 334 (3d Cir. 1995) (“[I]t must appear that there has been an actual suppression or withholding of the evidence. No unfavorable inference arises when the circumstances indicate that the document or article in question has been lost or accidentally destroyed, or where the failure to produce it is otherwise properly accounted for.”); *accord Collins v. Throckmorton*, 425 A.2d 146, 150 (Del. 1980) (“[W]here a litigant intentionally suppresses or destroys pertinent evidence, an inference arises that such evidence would be unfavorable to his case.”).

In addition, when considering the degree of prejudice suffered by the party that did not

destroy the evidence, the court should take into account whether that party had a meaningful opportunity to examine the evidence in question before it was destroyed. *See Thiele v. Oddy's Auto & Marine, Inc.*, 906 F. Supp. 158, 162 (W.D.N.Y. 1995). As the *Thiele* court explained, when one side is completely deprived of the opportunity to inspect the evidence because it was destroyed after the other side had a chance to examine it, sanctions for spoliation are generally appropriate. *Id.* at 162-63 (“[W]ithout any ability to examine the boat, [the third-party defendant] will be greatly frustrated in its ability to defend its case. Since [the plaintiff] is plainly at fault for allowing the boat to be placed in a landfill, any claims against [the third-party defendant] must be dismissed.”); *see also Baliotis*, 870 F. Supp. at 1290-91 (“At a minimum . . . an opportunity for inspection should be afforded . . . before relevant evidence is destroyed.”).

In the present case, it is clear that Uhl’s destruction of his notes reflects an extreme degree of fault and personal responsibility. Indeed, he admits that he personally destroyed his contemporaneous account of events that are, at a minimum, relevant to the central issues in this case. Further, he destroyed the evidence, not before litigation ensued, but rather, months after Diebold served document requests in a related case, a month after Positran filed its complaint in the present case, and mere days before his own deposition. On these facts, Positran cannot credibly claim that Uhl was unaware of his obligations.

More disturbing still, Positran now attempts to explain the similarities between Uhl’s typewritten document and its complaint by arguing that the typewritten document is verbatim only to the extent that portions of the information were taken from Uhl’s handwritten notes. Positran further explains that Uhl may have also referred to other documents in preparing his typewritten notes. Thus, Positran’s explanation is basically that some of the typewritten document is a verbatim

transcript of Uhl's handwritten notes, but not necessarily all of it reflects his notes. Moreover, although Uhl himself denied having referred to outside documents at his April 16, 2003 deposition, Positran takes the position that he was "intimidated" during the questioning, and was thus incorrect on this point.

While the problems with Positran's explanation are manifold, the court need only address one to make its point. Assuming that Positran's version is correct, this position merely exacerbates the problem because it makes it even less clear whether the typed document bears any resemblance to Uhl's handwritten notes. Neither the court, nor Diebold, can know what Uhl culled from his notes, what he pulled from other sources, and what may have been destroyed in notes he ultimately omitted from the typewritten document.

Likewise, because Diebold has no means of determining what Uhl's contemporaneous notes described, the prejudice to Diebold is not insignificant. There is no question that Diebold did not have the opportunity to examine Uhl's notes prior to their destruction. Additionally, Diebold has presented evidence that the information in Uhl's handwritten document would have been relevant to its case. For instance, focusing just on the May 7, 2001 entry in Uhl's typed document, the meeting that day allegedly related to a "credit hold," Positran's refusal to ship products, a production cut-back, quality issues, and a possible account "netting" arrangement. These are all issues in the present case and in its related companion case. Instead of Uhl's contemporaneous notes of this meeting, however, Diebold is left with Positran's assurance that Uhl completely and accurately transcribed all of his notes from that meeting. Moreover, Uhl's actions have deprived Diebold of the opportunity to use a contemporaneous record to cross-examine Positran's representative to determine what really occurred. Thus, given Positran's own inability to coherently and consistently

explain what the typewritten document actually consists of, the court is compelled to conclude that Diebold has suffered prejudice through the loss of the handwritten document.

In light of the circumstances surrounding Uhl's destruction of his notes, the unavoidable inference is that the notes would have been helpful to Diebold's case. The court does not, however, believe that Diebold's requested sanction of dismissal is warranted in this case. Diebold has not argued that Uhl's handwritten notes are the only evidence available to prove its claims and adequately defend itself. Thus, while a sanction is clearly warranted, dismissal would be unjustly harsh. The court will, therefore, impose a "spoliation inference" in this case. This inference will allow the trier of fact, in this case, the court, to assume the destroyed evidence would have been unfavorable to the offending party. Such a sanction is sufficient to avoid substantial unfairness to Diebold, while at the same time serving as a deterrent to Positran, as well as other future litigants who may consider engaging in similar dilatory tactics.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

For the foregoing reasons, IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that:

1. Diebold's Motion for Relief from Intentional Destruction of Evidence (D.I. 25) is GRANTED.
2. Positran's Motion to Exceed Its Answering Brief Page Limit (D.I. 44) is declared MOOT.

Dated: May 15, 2003

Gregory M. Sleet  
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE