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Risk-takers wanted

Kiel manufacturer seeks people willing to do things differently

By Charlie Mathews
Herald Times Reporter

KIEL — Individuals who don't want to offer opinions or constructive criticism to co-workers need not apply for work at HUI.

Manufacturing plant majority owner Kurt Bell wants employees unafraid to try something new — and possibly fail.

"For the most part, people want to do the right thing," said Bell, 46. "But they may not know all the information they need to have to prioritize properly."

Bell said fostering a company culture that shares information and encourages risk taking to promote individual growth is HUI's core purpose and is fundamental to it being a "company of choice."

"We often describe the company and our ownership as contrarians," is part of an HUI document submitted to Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce.

HUI is one of 39 Wisconsin businesses nominated for the Wisconsin Manufacturer of the Year Awards, to be announced on Thursday, March 1.

HUI designs and manufactures custom products such as medical carts, enclosures, and computer chassis, usually made of steel or aluminum.

Wheeled medical carts, for example, might have metal trays at different heights for surgical instruments, or an EKG machine that rolls to different areas of a clinic or hospital. They can cost anywhere from \$300 to \$1,500.

Projects typically involve cutting, forming, welding and finishing, plating or powder coating, assembly, and packaging and shipping.

HUI has a variety of original equipment-manufacturer clients. Customer segments include health care, computer, consumer electronics and industrial applications. HUI's niche is low volume, quick turn, and highly engineered products.

Passion about being adults

InfoShare is the name for monthly meetings where sales projections, expected revenue and expenses are shared in detail. The walls of HUI feature dozens of financial charts, including "spending barometer" data.

Bell and HUI President Dan Ruedinger figure 130 heads can come up with more solutions than can a handful of company leaders.



Randy Kienbaum, a cell technician, welds pieces to assemble a medical cart at HUI. The Kiel manufacturing company says it keeps employees well-informed through meetings, including the monthly InfoShare. *Jaslyn Gilbert/HTR*

"At HUI, you know what is going on ... you don't feel left out in the dark," said Jenny Stodola, a "cell tech" and one of about 100 production workers.

An additional 30 people serve in engineering and administrative capacities.

Bell said just because someone chooses to do physical work does not mean they stop thinking.

"We'd like everyone to be engaged ... everyone will have opportunities to voice opinions and we will listen," he said.

HUI's culture creates the ability for employees to be business leaders, Bell said.

"It is allowing people to have passion about being adults, making decisions that affect our future," he said.

"It's not necessarily an easy path, there can be pain," said Julie Cosich, director of marketing and business development. "There's an expectation here that not only will I give feedback but I will get it, too."

Ruedinger said HUI's manufacturing processes aren't unique and the company doesn't possess any proprietary technology difficult for a customer to replicate.

"Our real differentiation is in doing things differently and solving (customers') problems," Ruedinger said.

Bay-Tek Games of Pulaski is using HUI expertise and ingenuity to cost-efficiently create the steel chassis for their 7-foot tall American Idol Superstar prize redemption game.

"HUI has a strong understanding of 'lean' manufacturing, and they fit well with our culture," said Kathy Treankler, Bay-Tek Games president.

"Their general business practices have impressed us," said Arthur Gilbert, of Mercury Marine. The Fond du Lac company contracts with HUI to powder coat about 400,000 aluminum propellers annually.

"HUI really encourages employees to develop themselves and is ahead of their time," Gilbert said. "They have big-company ideas."

It's an environment Jason Schneider, 25, said he enjoys. He works in the area of the facility where prototypes are created on computers, and "job instruction" sheets are fine-tuned for maximum efficiency when they're implemented on the production floor.

"My title is engineering but I know the basics of everybody in this room," Schneider said. "If I know how something works ahead or behind me, and know how what I do affects them, I can make changes to make somebody else's life a little easier."

That's just the kind of cooperative attitude Bell tries to foster, and he believes Kiel is the perfect location for HUI.

"You might think Kiel is in the middle of nowhere, but I think it is in the middle of everywhere," Bell said. "We can get to all the major manufacturing areas in the state within an hour."

"The work ethic of the folks we can hire from around here makes this an excellent labor market," Bell said. "Kiel is a great place for us to be."

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