

Lakeside Plastics celebrates past, and current, success

Firm has grown during scary downturn of global auto industry

BY ELLEN VAN WAGENINGEN, THE WINDSOR STAR JUNE 17, 2011



Glenn Coates, the president of Lakeside Plastics, is pictured in the factory, Friday, June 17, 2011.

Photograph by: Dax Melmer, The Windsor Star

TECUMSEH, Ont. -- Employees of auto parts maker Lakeside Plastics Ltd. and their families are gathering Saturday to celebrate being in fighting form as they come out of the scariest downturn the global auto industry has seen.

The locally-owned, 34-year-old company that makes plastic auto parts is growing. It has hired 100 new employees since January, bringing its total workforce to 325.

In the last two years, it has expanded and connected the three buildings that make up its Oldcastle factory with the help of a federal government loan.

It also purchased new state-of-the-art injection mould machines, more automation equipment and specialized computer terminals for every work station on the plant floor.

For two years running it has been recognized for innovation, superior quality, competitive costs and being great to work with by its biggest customer, General Motors. Another major customer, Johnson Controls, has given it a similar award the for the last three years.

When the new Chevrolet Sonic subcompact starts rolling off the production line at a GM factory in Michigan most of its interior plastic parts, except the dashboard, will come from Lakeside Plastics. The company is also in the midst of pursuing new work from other automakers, said president Glenn Coates.

Lakeside Plastics has followed the path experts say Canada's auto suppliers need to take to maintain a claim in an increasingly competitive global industry.

Marta Markovic, who has been with the company for 24 years, has no doubt it can succeed.

"We're not scared. We'll make it, whatever happens," said the veteran employee who now trains and evaluates the new hires. "I haven't been one day out of work."

Shift supervisor Shelly Godard spends her days walking miles on a crowded plant floor that hums with the dull roar of dozens of machines.

A bundle of energy, she thrives in the high speed, high pressure environment.

"My love is being out on the floor," said Godard, who started 11 years ago in the company office.

"I don't see why not," she said when asked if Lakeside Plastics and its employees can continue to compete. "They've got the forethought, the imagination and the initiative to get things done, from the owner on down."

When Lakeside Plastics started hiring, it opened the door for Ashley Ford, who was looking for an opportunity to start a new career after several years of waitressing.

"I feel very fortunate," she said as she took a brief break from training Friday.

Showing Ford the ropes was Debbie Peyton, who has been with Lakeside Plastics 11 years and calls it the best job she's ever had.

All the new equipment is making the work less labour intensive and the shop floor computers making logging and getting information at every work station much easier than in the past, she said.

The factory can now produce bigger parts and assemble plastic components, such as putting foam backing, speakers and clips onto interior door panels, Peyton explained.

The plant runs 24 hours a day on three shifts from Monday through Friday, which is why a celebration picnic for employees and suppliers is being held today at the Ciociaro Club, Coates said.

"Building construction, commissioning of new machines, launching new vehicle programs, and adding and training about 100 new people — if you put that all together its just phenomenal what our people have accomplished in the last year. I'm extremely proud of them," he said.

Ten GM officials are expected to attend, as well as representatives of three companies Lakeside Plastics is honouring for being good partners — Wincon Construction, Unique Tool and Gauge, and Unique Fabricating Inc.

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Lakeside Plastics workers, John Trocchi, left, and Giselle Labonte work at the plant Friday, June 17, 2011.
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