

ROCHESTER BUSINESS JOURNAL

[PRINT](#) | [CLOSE WINDOW](#)

His key talent: figuring it out

By ANDREA DECKERT - 7/4/2008

Michael Bechtold knew he had a love-and a knack-for mechanical equipment and operations when a colleague at Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf asked him to look at a lathe that had broken down at the school's manufacturing processes lab.

Bechtold had landed a job as a lab technician at NTID after graduating from college and searching for more traditional, but scarce, teaching positions.

Having taken only a mechanical drawing class in high school, Bechtold told his co-worker he was not sure he could fix the machine. The colleague told him to give it a try; if he could not figure it out, they would have someone else come in.

Bechtold, reading mechanical prints of the machine, was able to fix the problem and get it working.

"That was the beginning of it, when I knew I loved tearing stuff apart and fixing problems," Bechtold says. "Even if I didn't know what I was doing at first, I kept going until I figured out the problem."

That stick-with-it attitude has stuck with Bechtold professionally, into his current role as president of OptiPro Systems Inc.

Based in Ontario, Wayne County, the firm designs, manufactures and sells computer numerically controlled grinding and polishing centers for the precision optics industry. OptiPro also is a distributor and trainer for Mastercam software used in computer-aided design and computer-aided manufacturing programs and distributes machine tools.

What helps make OptiPro a success is the persistence of his roughly 30 employees to find solutions for their customers, a mentality identical to his own, Bechtold says.

Bechtold, 54, almost dares people to bring OptiPro their problems and say there is nothing that can be done to fix them.

"People telling us we can't do something is the worst thing to tell us because then we will work on it until we figure it out," Bechtold says. "It's almost like we're too stupid to know we can't do it, so we just go ahead and do it anyway."

Entrepreneurial family

He believes he may have gotten the drive to succeed from his father, the late Robert Bechtold, who owned the former Rochester Tile and Marble Co.

"Seeing my dad having his own business had an impact," Bechtold says. "I saw he could do it and thought so could I."

Plans for business ownership, however, were not a key priority while Bechtold attended Bishop Kearney High School.

"My interests were sports and girls," he says with a laugh. "I didn't have a particular career in mind."

After graduating from high school, Bechtold attended SUNY College at Cortland to study education. A coach to Little League teams when he was growing up, and a high school athlete, Bechtold enjoyed working with youths and decided to pursue a career in physical education.

After receiving his bachelor of science degree in education in 1976, however, Bechtold discovered that teaching jobs were hard to find. His brother, Robert, found the position at NTID and encouraged him to apply.

Bechtold worked there roughly two years before getting a job teaching health at Bishop Kearney.

He enjoyed teaching at his alma matter, but a year later, NTID wanted him back and offered Bechtold a job with more responsibilities and better pay. He stayed there another year before being offered a job to run the rebuilding-service department of a machine shop the school did business with.

A few years later, Bechtold started his own machine tool repair business, Bec-Tec, in Webster.

Shortly after that, Bechtold and his brother started CNC Systems Inc., the company that would become OptiPro, in their dad's barn in 1981. The firm installed and serviced machining tools.

The business was a part-time venture for both. Michael Bechtold still had Bec-Tec and Robert Bechtold owned Harbec Plastics Inc.

Two to three years into CNC Systems, however, Michael Bechtold decided to dedicate himself to the business full time, as the computer numerically controlled market was heating up.

The timing was right for such a company, he says. It was a period when even small manufacturing companies were looking to add CNC machines and related tools to their businesses due to the decreasing costs of the products.

CNC Systems began selling Mastercam software for the CNC machines and related machine tools.

While the company did well as a distributor, Bechtold says his dream was to build his own machines. So the firm began making and selling CNC machines. It expanded its operations, purchasing a small machine distributor in California, and began making the machines the company had imported from Japan.

Changing focus

In 1989, the company began working in optics when Eastman Kodak Co. tapped it for an optical-type CNC machine.

The work was a success, and Kodak used the equipment for several years. The relationship with Kodak led OptiPro to the University of Rochester's Center for Optics Manufacturing. There Bechtold worked with COM, developing processes and products for the optics industry in the early 1990s.

Working with the center, now an optical processing group within UR's Laboratory for Laser Energetics, gave OptiPro credibility in the optics industry, he says.

In the late 1990s, OptiPro collaborated with COM to create the Opticam SX, an optical machining center for grinding and polishing spherical, aspherical and conformal optics. OptiPro sells the product.

Edward Fess, a senior lab engineer at the Laboratory for Laser Energetics, has known Bechtold professionally since he started working with COM.

"Mike is very open to new ideas and is always willing to try to work things out and solve complex problems," Fess says. "It's fun to work with someone like that."

Shortly after the release of Opticam, the company changed its name to OptiPro. It also moved from space at Harbec to a 12,500-square-foot building next door in Beh Industrial Park.

The work with Kodak and COM led OptiPro to seek federal grants for new products. OptiPro has received seven Phase I Small Business and Innovation Research awards with both the Navy and the Army and six Phase II SBIR awards.

On one occasion, OptiPro was asked by the Department of Defense to develop an optics-polishing technique for arbitrary shapes, particularly those that are more aerodynamic than the traditional spherical and flat shapes.

The Army was looking for a process to finish conformal optics-optics that conform to the shape they are covering, especially in hard materials such as AION, a tough lightweight transparent ceramic material often used in high-performance missile domes.

OptiPro received up to \$850,000 in funding from the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, the research and

development organization for the Department of Defense, for the concept.

The end result was UltraForm Finishing, a cost-effective technique for aspheric and conformal-shaped optics, Bechtold said. It took nearly five years to develop but is now on the market, and OptiPro has sold four UltraForm Finishing machines.

"What was once OptiPro's folly turned into a product that really works well," Bechtold says.

He explained it took a long time to get it right, and people were skeptical of the product during development.

OptiPro's business now is divided equally between distributing CNC tools and software and selling machines to optics firms.

The company's primary focus is on U.S. customers, but it has shipped machines to Canada and Japan.

OptiPro does business with several local optics companies, including Optimax Systems Inc., across the street from OptiPro. In addition to the federal government, OptiPro works with leading aerospace and defense companies, such as Lockheed Martin Corp. and Rockwell Collins Inc.

What helps make the company a success is its attention to customer satisfaction, Bechtold says.

"If we aren't providing good service, then I don't know about it," he says.

Bechtold adds the firm's employees—a mix of technicians, engineers and machinists—all bring a skill to the job and want to succeed.

"They see something we created that customers are using to make money with and they get really excited," he says.

A challenging part of the business is balancing growth without growing too fast, he says.

Bechtold declined to disclose revenues for the privately held firm but said sales have grown a total of 25 percent over the past three years.

He says he leads by example. A friendly, personable guy, Bechtold also tells it like it is.

"There are no prima donnas here," he says. "People who work here know they have to do what it takes to make the place successful."

Bechtold says his first love is being on the shop floor, but he also spends a good part of his day managing the overall operations.

The best part of the job is the research that goes into developing new products. Books, manuals and other resource guides line his office, along with numerous pictures of his family and coffee cups he has picked up on his travels or received as gifts.

A believer in a technical education, Bechtold has ties with the local universities and colleges, providing co-ops for students and helping spread the word about the optics manufacturing field.

John Costello, president of the Rochester division of First Niagara Risk Management Inc., has known Bechtold since kindergarten. The two attended the same grammar school and Bishop Kearney.

Costello says Bechtold's ability to connect with people has helped him succeed in business.

"He exhibits enthusiasm for the work he does and is truly all about making it work for his customers," Costello says.

He described Bechtold as dependable, honest and a great listener.

"He is the best friend any person could ever have," Costello says.

Off-the-job focus

Bechtold lives in Ontario with his wife, Lynda, who also works at OptiPro. He has two daughters, Danielle, 26, and Teresa, 21;

two sons, Thomas, 23, and Robert, 18; and stepchildren, Amanda, 25, and Scott, 24.

When not working, he enjoys snowboarding and boating, often taking his motor boat out onto Irondequoit Bay. He also plays basketball three mornings a week.

Professionally, Bechtold says, he will continue to look for the next challenge. The firm has SBIR contracts in place to develop new technologies and products.

"I've never been afraid of the unknown," he says.

adeckert@rbj.net / 585-546-8303

Michael Bechtold

Position: President, Optipro Systems Inc.

Education: B.S. in education, SUNY College at Cortland, 1976

Age: 54

Family: Wife, Lynda; daughters, Danielle, 26, and Teresa, 21; sons, Thomas, 23, and Robert, 18; stepchildren, Amanda, 25, and Scott, 24

Residence: Ontario, Wayne County

Outside activities: Snowboarding, boating, basketball

Quote: "People telling us we can't do something is the worst thing to tell us because then we will work on it until we figure it out. It's almost like we're too stupid to know we can't do it, so we just go ahead and do it anyway."

07/04/2008 (C) Rochester Business Journal