

May 15, 2009

A different Detroit

"Look at the floor."

That was Kent Woody, quality guru at **Auto Metal Craft** in Oak Park, Mich., a prototype shop just a few miles from the Detroit Three's epicenter. The concrete floor I looked at was worn from years of use. "That's decades of hi-lo traffic, right there," he said. "That's history."

Kent's father, Patrick, bought the place in the 1970s, and today company managers face one of the most challenging marketplaces they have ever experienced. Auto Metal Craft, like many shops today--particularly in Michigan--has downsized to sustain during the downturn.

The car business had had its ups and downs for decades, but as Kent and his brother Kevin (company president) explained to me, the auto industry's dominance made the Detroit manufacturing community tight, all building livelihoods on an automotive business that, despite its headaches, would support them enough to sustain a business and support a family.

Oh, how times have changed.

Auto Metal Craft, still predominantly an automotive prototype shop, is on a quest to balance out its customer mix. During my visit earlier this week, I saw prototypes for the appliance and cookware marketplaces, for instance. The company is also dipping its toes in some low-volume production, but to wade in farther will require some rethinking about machine layout: The shop's currently split between two buildings a block apart. Kevin told me he'd like nothing more than to get all the shop's technology--its 3-D laser cutting systems, hydraulic presses, spot welding, hand hammering, two CMM inspection systems, and other equipment--under one roof for more efficient part flow.

"But these buildings are paid for," Kevin said, "and today, that's a good thing."

The shop's reputation for quality is sustaining it. The business is ISO-certified, and employees find creative ways to produce prototypes quickly. In fact, after the downsizing emerged a bittersweet reality: Every employee on the shop floor is an experienced, cross-trained journeyman.

Kevin plans to hold on to the company's metal fabricating talent, but he said he also knows a plethora of talent collecting unemployment. Detroit may make the news for its struggling economy, but he said it's one of the few places in the country with so much manufacturing talent eager for a job. Looking for a welder skilled in multiple processes, who also can run a lathe, a press brake, or a shear? You may be able to find one in Detroit.

It's my hope all that talent doesn't go to waste.

Posted At : 8:01 AM. | Posted By : Tim Heston