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140 years of success

By MARISSA DECHANT Staff writer 6 hrs ago



Operations manager David Greene (left) and shell room supervisor Mark Sanner review workplace processes with employee Franklin Bronze in one of the plant's production rooms. (Contributed photo)

What does it take for a business to remain lucrative for 140 years?

For Franklin Bronze Precision Components, located at 655 Grant St., long-term success boils down to one consistent factor: its employees. Many of them still walk to work from throughout the Third Ward, according to operations manager Dave Greene.

"Employee engagement here is well above what I've seen (at other plants)," said Greene, who brought 30 years of experience in management of manufacturing plants when he was hired on earlier this year.

Started in 1878 as a sand casting foundry, Franklin Bronze has steadily grown throughout the years to employ about 100 people while it engages with new technology and a progressive take on workplace improvements.

The company, which specializes in investment castings, is a world leader in the glass mold industry and has more than 20 years experience with industrial casting. The latter includes industries such as military, transportation, steel, heavy equipment and food handling.

Franklin Bronze is also looking to expand in industries like agriculture, recreation and transportation.

Changing workplace

A whirring meets the ears of those who step inside the production rooms at Franklin Bronze. Pressurized machines melt wax to create initial molds while in another room, sander machines add a final hard coating onto molds before they are filled with one of several melted alloys - bronze, nickel, brass or stainless steel.

The final product is eventually sent to the manufacturing clients, with many located within Pennsylvania or neighboring states like New York, Ohio and West Virginia. Other clients are located in California and as far away as Croatia where glass mold castings are sent.

Of Franklin Bronze's 75 active customers, 30 percent are located overseas, making the plant's parent company, Wall Colmonoy Corp. of Madison Heights, Michigan, eager to invest in new equipment and resources, said Franklin Bronze general manager John Nichols.

Nichols described two recent technological upgrades - a dry blast system and 3D printers. The dry blast system quickens the process of cleaning metal castings of the plaster-like mold material, while 3D printing allows workers to create small batches of wax molds in less time than the traditional wax machines.

"It's a cycle we want to continue to become more efficient and competitive," said Nichols.

The general manager hopes to add labor resources, too, citing a goal to fill the worksite to 100 percent capacity. That could involve a 50 percent growth in the current workforce, he said.

In fact, Franklin Bronze has hired six new employees in the last several months and often seeks to promote workers within the company.

Many positions are specialized and require in-house training, with good job candidates often having a general laborer background with a decent physical skill set, said Greene.

As of May 24, Franklin Bronze had gone an entire year without a workplace accident, a safety achievement the company celebrates with its employees.

"It's a big deal in the foundry industry," said Greene. "It's something we're pretty proud of."

That safety goal was likely met in part due to the company's continuous improvement project, which aims to engage employees in the creation of a more streamlined work environment.

The project allows employees to submit handwritten suggestions that have repeatedly been used to improve on-floor processes and reduce the amount of gas and electricity utilized in the plant.

"We encourage not just coming up with an idea and putting it in the box for someone else to deal with, but also providing the resources necessary to make that change. When stuff like that happens, things have got to get better," Nichols said.

When explaining what sets Franklin Bronze apart from other companies, marketing and sale coordinator Shelly Winters pointed to employees' work ethic and professionalism.

"It's a level of people caring about their work and wanting to make things better," she said.