

drives me to share my knowledge and help grow the careers of anyone who shows the aptitude and interest on a daily basis. That is the true spirit of apprenticeship, and our trade will die without it," said Landon.

Currently the area manager at Engineered Solutions Group, Landon is responsible for a group of six machinists that operate 10 machines with capacities from 1 in. dia. to 24 in. of swing with lengths up to 120 in.

The primary focus of the company is the manufacturing of parts for drilling motors, including its own line of bearings.

"On a day-to-day basis, I will handle everything from programming and helping employees in the shop to communicating with customers and engineering to ensure we are putting out the best-quality product possible in the most efficient way," he said. "I like the fact that my current role empowers me to innovate and try new things, and I have a great team who is always willing to follow my lead."

Alberta, unlike many other provinces, is highly dependent on one industry. In this case, it's oil and gas. Riding the highs and lows of that sector definitely is challenging for every shop.

"Alberta is not in a boom in which shop owners are able to spend money on new and more capable equipment as readily as they have been in the past. Innovation on a day-to-day basis, increasing the capabilities of the shop while adding minimal cost, is what consumes my day and keeps me interested," he said. "For manufacturing success in this market, I believe we will have to stay flexible, be open to new ideas, always be thinking of ways to improve, and maintain our equipment to the best of our abilities."

DAVID LANGEN
AFA SYSTEMS
BRAMPTON, ONT.

Multi-generational family businesses are the backbone of Canadian manufacturing.

Passion for the business, and for manufacturing, is passed down, creating steady, local jobs while building on long-standing traditions.

David Langen knows all about these traditions.

"The Langen family has a long history in the packaging machinery business," he explained. "Langen Packaging was established by my grandfather and his brother

in 1955. I grew up visiting the factory regularly. I think my first visit to the PMMI packaging show in Chicago was also a big turning point. It showed me the size and scale of the business and really got me addicted to the industry."

While it was his family's direct involvement in the industry that initially drew Langen into the manufacturing sector, it was the nature of the business that kept him interested.

"The problems that we are solving at AFA are well defined. Customers typically are seeking to package a product at a specified rate. Project life cycles are relatively short, usually in the 20-week range, so you can see tangible results to your efforts quickly," he said. "The machines themselves have long life cycles. We are still dealing with customers that have 20- to 30-year-old equipment. It keeps you close to your customers and to the products that you've invested so much of your energy and time in."

In his role at AFA Systems, Langen focuses on two main areas. First, he is involved in the control and electrical engineering department. This includes electrical schematic design, programming design, and customer service. Second, he has a role in the business information side of the company, which includes designing, deploying, and maintaining the ERP system.

"I have an engineering background that has really helped with the technical aspects of the business," explained Langen. "I'm very interested in solving problems, and having a technical background gives me more tools to help solve them."

As in most family-run businesses, it's not just family members who tend to stay with the company for a long time. Other staff members are dedicated and feel a sense of ownership as well.

"Many of the people that worked at AFA when I started are still here. I've learned a tremendous amount from them," said



David Langen

Langen. "Coming from a family that is steeped in the packaging machinery industry also has been a source of support and wisdom."

Having the tribal knowledge that comes with a multi-generational business makes dealing with the unexpected a little easier to handle. However, it still comes down to making the correct decisions.

"Unexpected circumstances will always come up in this business. In manufacturing, problems need to be solved quickly and correctly. Knowing that I, and the company we've built, can come up with these solutions is the biggest [asset]. As I've taken on more responsibility, the most important skill I've learned is the ability to prioritize. You can get easily bogged down in issues that don't need to be dealt with right away," said Langen.

In a business that has been around since the '50s, a lot has changed. In this new age of manufacturing it's important to grow and adapt to new technologies.

"We firmly believe that to grow the business we need to have a broad product offering," said Langen. "Currently we

are working on the development of a new case erector model that is capable of high speeds and quick changeovers."

This type of development requires commitment and experience to be implemented properly. It's something that a company that has been around for six decades typically does well. It's not without its challenges, however, especially as the industry becomes more digitalized.

"Networking technologies are improving in both scale and speed at a rapid pace. This will provide an opportunity to collect a massive amount of data," said Langen. "Understanding this data and using it productively will be an important problem that will have to be thought through."

So what does it take to keep a manufacturing business operating successfully for three generations? That's easy, according to Langen.

"You need to be hard-working, clear-minded, and confident. What has changed recently is the huge number of technologies out there that can help you to be successful. Having an understanding of what is available is critical," he said. 

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