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# Parts of the whole

A manufacturing company in Blaine makes precise parts that become part of anything from an MP3 player to a heart defibrillator.

By Sarah Moran, Star Tribune  
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Thin, shiny coils of titanium, copper, stainless steel and platinum are transformed into teeny-tiny parts that go into hearing aids, dental components and cell phones at Top Tool in Blaine.

The company specializes in thin metals that make precision components. Top Tool is rare in that it makes both the end result (for example, a small metal piece in a hearing aid) as well as the "tool and die" (or the contraption that transforms a metal strip into a hearing aid part).

Manufacturing has "reinvented itself," CEO Elizabeth Abraham said, and Top Tool is "growing fantastically." In 2006 the company had revenue just under \$3 million, and this year it's on track for at least \$5 million.

Top Tool makes parts as well

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as tools and dies for medical, electronic and consumer products. With clients in many parts of the country, if a region or one of the three sectors are depressed, it shouldn't hurt their bottom line, Abraham said.

"The best-kept secret in Minnesota is manufacturing is booming," she said.

One reason many people cite for the success at Top Tool is the central role collaboration plays in everything. Elizabeth and her husband, Al Abraham, company president, tried to foster a team-oriented environment when they took over in 1987. They have employees "wear many hats" or in other words, train and work in multiple areas so they will better understand how each part contributes to success.

"We turned it from people having their own territory areas into people having ownership of the whole company," Elizabeth Abraham said. "So what's good for the tool and die room is also good for the press room."

Continuous training for current employees is just as important to the company as helping train and educate potential employees. They work regularly with colleges to help develop curriculum and to partner with them for grants and work opportunities.

Peggy Schipper, a student at Hennepin Technical College, is participating in a manufacturing program that puts her education on a fast track so she can quickly start working in an industry hungry for help. After 12 weeks of school she landed at Top Tool for 480 hours of on-the-job training. She's been in the press room, operating a 35-ton press, among other things.

"Elizabeth comes up to you and says, 'How's it going, how are you learning,' " Schipper said. "And the guys, whether they're tool makers or in the press room, they are more than willing to help and talk to me and explain things in more detail."

Once Schipper's training is finished, she'll be back to school for nine weeks and then will graduate.

Elizabeth Abraham said prospects are good for people trained or certified in manufacturing. She said Top Tool pays on the high end of the industry, and employees make from \$8.50 to more than \$30 an hour, potentially earning up to about \$100,000 a year with overtime.

As clean, precise and organized as the facility and work flow have to be, employees say it doesn't translate into rigidity on the part of employers.

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"They're very welcoming and open to employees' opinions," said Deon Hawfitch, press room supervisor. "It's not just 'Because I own it what I say goes', it's 'You guys do this stuff -- what do you need, what's your opinion?'" Hawfitch said.

Perhaps Elizabeth Abraham's background as a psychologist helps with the collaboration, but she said the industry in general has been moving toward increasing communication, even among competitors, who are sharing ideas and tips more than ever. Working together helps U.S. manufacturers compete with cheaper manufacturing labor overseas, she said.

"We've been really trying to define ourselves and try to match that up to companies that have the same values," she said. "If they're looking for high quality and they want America to remain strong, they'll come to us."

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