

THE ILLINOIS **Manufacturer**

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leaders can take now to build a
culture of accountability in 2014**

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Electricity consumer
competitive choice**

IMA MEMBER PROFILE:

Bison Gear & Engineering



LOKUMA

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Bison Gear & Engineering



Bison's Bob McCrory (far right) runs the company's Hobbying Department. Bison hosts facility tours for high school and community college students.

By Dan Naumovich

Last year, Bison Gear and Engineering donated motors to two different area high schools, without any specific instructions as to what they might be used for. On its face, it might seem like a curious act of philanthropy, one of questionable value to the schools. But a deeper look at the story reveals that it's just another example of the company's commitment to education and workforce development.

Bison is located in St. Charles where they manufacture gearboxes and gear motors that serve a wide range of industries throughout the world. The company was founded in 1960 and was acquired by current chairman, Ron Bullock, and his father, Norman Bullock, in 1987. Bison produced over 500,000 units last year, including the two that were donated to those high schools.

Two teams of students — from Infinity Math & Science Academy and Glenbrook South High School — were given the motors, along with a stipend, and were challenged with creating and implementing a real-world application. Mike O'Donnell, Bison's Electrical Engineering Manager and technical

adviser for the project, worked with the students and in a few weeks they brought their application from concept to working prototype. The academy team created a machine to make flavored ice. The Glenbrook students designed a high-tech gum-ball machine.

"We implemented our Illinois Innovation and Technology Challenge as a way to reach students while they are still honing their interests and staking out their futures. It's a way to spark their imagination and to demonstrate how their studies in math, science and technology will pay dividends once they join the workforce, especially in the manufacturing industry," Ron Bullock said.

It's not news to anyone in manufacturing that retiring baby boomers are creating a huge demand for qualified replacement workers. In Illinois, it's estimated that approximately 30,000 production line workers will need to be replaced every year for the next fifteen years.

In 2009, when Bullock ended his tenure as the chairman of the Illinois Manufacturers' Association's (IMA) Board of Directors, he turned his focus to workforce development

so that this need could be more fully addressed. His passion and commitment to the effort led to his appointment to lead the IMA's Education Foundation.

A long-time advocate for education reform, Bullock was instrumental in the creation of the Manufacturer's Education Initiative, a comprehensive approach to preparing students and adults for careers in manufacturing. The initiative focuses on establishing standards so that education curricula are properly aligned with the skills and knowledge required of modern manufacturing workers. After just one year, 26 out of 48 of the state's community colleges have implemented the program, along with a dozen early-adopter high schools.

In addition to his work on behalf of the IMA, Bullock has also chaired the Manufacturing Institute, and is well-known throughout the country as an expert on improving career and technical education. While he advocates at an industry level, Bullock also puts his beliefs into action at the company he leads.

With its 259 employees, Bison is a relatively small organization in rela-

tion to its key competitors. One of the keys to its success in the industry is the company's commitment to staying ahead of the curve when it comes to developing and maintaining a skilled and productive workforce.

"There are many components required to make sure that you're attracting talent and staying on pace with the competition, if not ahead of it. And for a small corporation I do think we are ahead. Some of the things we do internally to promote teamwork, job performance and an individual's well-being are consistent with what larger corporations are doing," said Sylvia Wetzal, Chief Learning Officer at Bison.

Bison believes that it is important to be involved with educators in their community, in part so that they can achieve goals similar to those of the Manufacturer's Education Initiative.

"It's very important for us to partner with our local community colleges and have a seat on the workforce development boards. It helps us develop an understanding of what we need to attract the workforce for our industry," Wetzal said.

The partnerships are also beneficial to educators, who need to ensure that the deliverables they are offering are current with the ever-evolving standards in the manufacturing industry.

Developing the workforce of tomorrow is a critical task, but it is equally important to ensure that those prospective employees who are knocking on the door today are up to the challenge of working in an increasingly complex and high-tech environment.

As part of their evaluation during



Bob McCrory (center) discusses the processes used in gear making with a visiting student.

the hiring process, Bison administers on-site job skills assessment using ACT WorkKeys. The system was developed to assist businesses in measuring workplace competencies. Bison requires that all new employees achieve level four scores in all categories before being considered for employment.

"Having that assessment done on-site before hiring has really scaled-up the quality of individual that we place on the production floor," Wetzal said.

Once on board, production workers have the opportunity to better themselves by becoming a Certified Production Technician through the Manufacturing Skill Standards Council's training and assessment system. The system is a self-directed program that is accessed online and covers safety, quality, processes and production, and maintenance. Not only does Bison pay for the cost of the training, employees are rewarded with \$100 for each of the four modules that they complete, plus an additional \$100 if they become certified.

All of Bison's employees — the

engineers, executives and production workers — are encouraged to pursue continuous improvement through post-secondary education, and the company provides them plenty of support and incentive to do so.

Growth Education and Results (GEAR) is a learn-and-earn program that provides monetary support to employees seeking a degree. The company pays for tuition and fees up front, rather than through a reimbursement, so that employees incur no out-of-pocket expenses. While all employees are encouraged to attain at least an associate's degree, more advanced degrees are allowed when it fits into the employee's career path with Bison. Currently, 18 percent of their workforce is participating in GEAR.

While Bison is heavily committed to providing learning opportunities for their employees, they understand that both productivity and job satisfaction is also influenced directly by an individual's health and well-being.

The company operates an on-site clinic in conjunction with Advocate

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Bison employee John Wright (photo on left and below in blue shirt) shows students motor assemblies and finished gear sets in the Focus Factory at Bison.



BISON

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Health Care, the largest health care delivery system in Illinois. A nurse practitioner can provide employees treatment for such things as minor injuries and infections, while also providing preventative services such as physicals, cholesterol testing and flu shots. The services are covered under Bison's Health and Wellness Plan, adding to the convenience of receiving immediate care.

In addition to the clinic, the company also provides employees with a fully-equipped fitness center, as well as free consultations with health coaches who are brought on-site two times each week. It's an investment that has paid large dividends.

"These kinds of things within an organization really attract talent, but it also helps to keep costs down because individuals are taking ownership over their own health. And really, that's a part of learning as well," Wetzel said.

Through the company's BisonCares program, employees are

also given the opportunity to improve the lives of others, both in their local community, and throughout the world. Past efforts have included providing assistance to the victims of Hurricane Katrina, to supporting the area Toys for Tots program. The BisonCares program also provides scholarships to area students.

"It really all ties together — work-force development, job satisfaction, being a good neighbor in the community. We're in the business of manufacturing, but to operate at peak efficiency, we need to make sure that we're addressing all of these things as best we can. And I think it's important for the public to know what manufacturers are doing for the state and its people in this regard," Bullock said. ■

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School groups like the one pictured here tour Bison Gear & Engineering as part of the STEM project. Sylvia Wetzel (far right), Bison's Chief Learning Officer, was recently honored by The Manufacturing Institute for her hard work and dedication to the STEP Ahead program.

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