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Foundry employees share in profits

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CICERO — At Syracuse Castings, employees reap the rewards of a profitable company.

"Today is a happy day," says Mark Pulver, vice president and general manager. On May 16, all 80 employees received a company-wide performance bonus. Each check was for \$925.

"They're sharing in the success," he says. "It's only fair that the company do its part."

Syracuse Castings manufactures and distributes construction products, such as manhole covers and frames, drainage grates and access hatches. The company works with the construction industry, utility companies such as Niagara Mohawk, and highway organizations such as the New York State Department of Transportation.

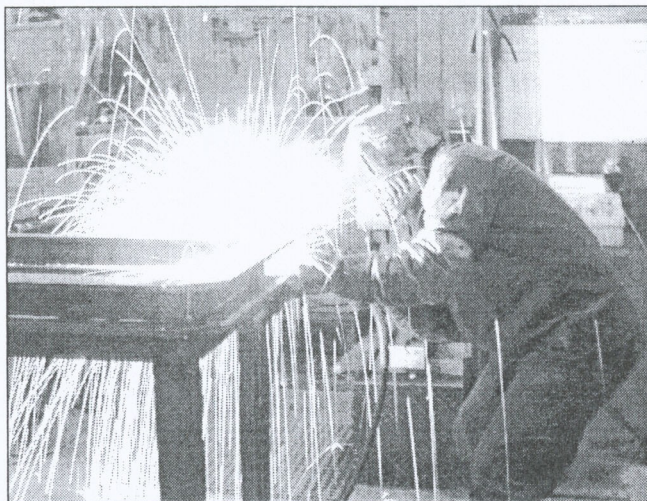
"The Northeast region is our traditional selling area," says Timothy McKernan, operations manager. "We're now a national company."

One of the biggest costs to the company is raw materials. McKernan says the company purchases eight-million to 10-million pounds of steel each year, and one million pounds of aluminum.

Pulver says the company faces a lot of competition these days, particularly from manufacturers in China and India.

"The character of the business changed in the '70s," he says, referring to the Clean Air Act that put most foundries out of business. "There's a lot of consolidation. There are much larger players than us."

McKernan says that product innovation helps Syracuse Castings thrive. The company's patented parabolic manhole cover is one example, he says.



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Rich Muolo, employee on the night shift at Syracuse Castings, welds a metal piece. The company manufactures and distributes construction products, such as manhole covers and frames, drainage grates and access hatches.

Using finite element analysis, engineers designed a manhole that is both stronger and lighter than previous models. Safe Hatch is another example of product innovation, he says. The hatch is a rectangular manhole cover that, when lifted, reveals grating underneath.

"These pits are 20 to 30 feet deep," McKernan says, adding that workers were falling in and at times, getting killed. "When they open these covers, they just have to do a visual inspection. It's been a huge hit and [is] literally transforming the industry."

Thanks to this latest product, ITT Flygt, a Connecticut-based company, contacted Syracuse Castings. The company now has a contract with Flygt to manufacture all its access hatches in the United States and Canada. "Our old products couldn't penetrate Canada," McKernan says. "This, now, has opened it up."

McKernan adds that 25 per-

cent of the products manufactured at Syracuse Castings are hatches. "It's one of the fastest growing products here," he says. "There is tons of opportunity."

Pulver's father, Harry, worked as a salesman for New Jersey-based Campbell Foundry during the 1960s. Syracuse Casting (originally spelled without a final "s") at the time was closing, so Pulver and John Campbell purchased it in 1971. Syracuse Castings Sales Corporation, as it then became known, began as a reseller of manufactured goods. In 1978, manufacturing made up only 5 percent of the business, while reselling made up the remaining portion. Today, at Syracuse Castings, manufacturing makes up 60 percent of sales and reselling the other 40 percent. The Pulver and Campbell families both own the company, but the Campbells have the majority.

Pulver associates the phrase

"Better by Design" with his company, and says it is more than just a logo. "It's about being purposeful about what we do as an organization and how we act as an organization," he says. "We're geared toward adding value to the customer."

From this philosophy stemmed the team approach to the business, which Pulver says was a change from his father's rule. "The way to do it used to be how they told you," he says. "When I took over from my dad, I pushed the decision-making down and responsibility to the lowest levels."

McKernan says this decision has made employees happier. "We used to have outside salespeople, who were the 'elite' of the company," he says. "They would pass the order on to someone else, and once they were done with it, would throw it over the walls. It was very departmentalized." Now, the company has cross-functional teams that work together on projects. "Now, they're totally in control," McKernan says of the employees.

Syracuse Castings became a lean manufacturer in early 2001 and McKernan says the change has been "phenomenal." Along with teamwork, the lean manufacturing has led to a 40-percent increase in the output of the plant, McKernan says.

Pulver says the company has great potential and has a particular vision for the future.

"In our own business, most companies like us see products as commodities," he says. "They have no vision for identifying customer needs and filling them. We want to be recognized as thinking of safety concerns." □

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