

Starn Tool & Manufacturing: Where Culture is King

Since the year 2000 until now, the number of tool and die shops in the Meadville, Pennsylvania, area has decreased significantly. However, there is one company that has weathered economic storms and is thriving. Meet Starn Tool & Manufacturing, where culture is king.



"We need our hires to fit our company culture, which is 'family first,'" said Bill Starn, CEO of Starn Tool & Manufacturing. "We look for fit and desire before we look for skills when we hire," he added.

This method has worked well for his company, which Starn said has added 25 percent more employees in the last 18 months. Starn said he usually has no problem finding good, young talent. "We'll go to the high schools and junior highs to make presentations, and we'll invite students and their parents to tour our facilities as well," Starn said.

Starn Tool & Manufacturing was started by Bill Starn's father, James O. Starn, and his uncle, Gleason Starn, out of his father's garage in 1945. In 1954 the company moved to its current location on Blooming Valley Road in Meadville, and the current building has been renovated several times since then.



According to Starn, his company has customers all over the world. Some of their products included the components necessary to control the mirror in the Kepler space telescope, which was launched by NASA in 2009. That telescope was able to capture formerly unseen images of interstellar space.

Starn also makes components for other optic systems, such as surveillance cameras, as well as parts for water and land-based robotic instruments. Since 1968, Starn has also been producing blow mold cavities for convoluted tubing used in wire harnesses.

So other than looking for the right attitude in employees to fit the company's culture, what are some of the other keys to Starn's success? "People turn to us when no other company can build what they need. Also, we're known as the fast turn-around guys," Starn said.

Another part of Starn's philosophy revolves around the importance of quality. "We'll never sacrifice quality for profit. If profit is your goal, bad things will happen. We aim to make our customers happy," Starn said.

Starn also credits his father for introducing him to the concept of "capacity utilization," which is the percentage of a business' actual output measured against its maximum potential output. Starn said this explains the key to an effective business. "If you're between 80-90 percent, your business will be successful."

Since Starn said he emphasizes the culture and family-like atmosphere at his company, he also likes to talk about young workers who have been successful there. "We have a young lady who has been working here since high school. She now is 24, and she has worked her way to office manager and is a member of our board as the company controller" Starn said.

To emphasize the connection among employees in the company, Starn said they've implemented quarterly and annual profit sharing, as well as company-wide events, such as pig roasts, golf outing and picnics.

Also, Starn said he encourages his employees to volunteer for various committees his business utilizes, and to make company-wide decisions on things such as insurance packages. "All employees are teachers as well as students," he added.

There's more to the Starn family than its employees, though. Besides Starn Tool & Manufacturing, there are other businesses in the Starn family. These include Mecal by Starn, the Starn Marketing Group, Penn Weld, and Starn Technical Services.

According to the Mecal by Starn website, the company provides applicators and tooling for the wire harness industry. It was founded in 2008, with the goal of supplying the best wire crimping equipment available.

While Mecal is based in Italy, Starn is the manufacturer and distributor of its products for the United States and Canada. "One of our domestic customers for Mecal products is Winnebago RV," Bill Starn said.

The Starn Marketing Group does web design, advertising, and helps companies with social media platforms as well. This division of the Starn family garnered the 2018 Small Business of the Year award from the Meadville-western Crawford County Chamber of Commerce.

Penn Weld, another division of the Starn family of businesses, specializes in custom fabrication. They produce extrusion cooling boxes and utility carts, as well as many different large fabricated products for industry.

The fifth member of the Starn family, Starn Technical Services, produces shop-management software. Starn Job Shop Manager Plus software manages the job-order cycle from order to shipment, according to its website. Starn Technical Services also offers custom software development for companies.

Bill Starn said, "We sold our first proprietary software in 1994, and we're still writing software every day." He added, "The software we make can interface with a business' accounting software, too."

While Bill Starn said he primarily looks for a good fit within his company's culture when he hires people, there are also some specific skills that potential employees should possess for some of the more specialized positions within the company.

Starn Tool could always use some people with a machining background, given the nature of its work. Mecal by Starn will sometimes deal with very small wire and tight tolerances, and those with a background using microscopes and small hand tools are helpful to the company.

The Starn Marketing Group would benefit from those who have a public relations, advertising, and communications background, while Penn Weld would employ welders and others who have fabricated items from metal.

To work at Starn Technical Services, having a background in software development and computer science would be a good fit. Thus, there are many types of training and education that can prepare people to work somewhere in the Starn family of companies.

Starn Tool and Manufacturing Company is the oldest contract tooling and machine shop in northwestern Pennsylvania. And the reason for its longevity might best be summed up by CEO Bill Starn: "We look for opportunities to make people successful."

