



An Unlimited Services employee assembles a 12V wire harness for a specialty vehicle.

GROUP EFFORT

A culture of continuous improvement – in manufacturing and worker development – guides Unlimited Services, a Wisconsin manufacturer. —HANNA ARONOVICH

TEAMWORK HAS BEEN THE FOUNDATION FOR Unlimited Services Inc.'s ongoing success. The Wisconsin-based company has been a manufacturer of custom wire harness, cable and control panel assemblies since 1983. Its products are used in off-road equipment, emergency, heavy-duty truck, telecommunication and specialty electronics industries.

President William Kessenich says Oshkosh Truck Corp., manufacturer of heavy-duty trucks, was Unlimited Services' first customer and is still working with the company today. "We value long-term relationships," he says.

Unlimited Services Vice President Mike Williams says the company grew with Oshkosh and "that allowed us to participate in a bigger part of their overall market." This year, Unlimited Services was nominated as one of Oshkosh's top-30 suppliers. "We are in the running to be their supplier of the year," he continues. "We have an excellent relationship with them, and they continue to be one of our key customers."

Williams notes Unlimited Services' sales fall in with the 80/20 rule, which makes customer relationships even more crucial. "We are in contact with our customers almost every day," he explains. "Because of the nature of the work we do – high-mix, low-volume products – scheduling is constantly changing. We need to adapt to our customers' demands to support them. But we like it like that. It is a wonderful opportunity for us to use our great labor force and expertise to really deliver."

"We value the partnerships we've formed with our customers," Kessenich says. "We view ourselves as an extension of their business. It is extremely important that we keep the communication lines open so we can respond as customer needs change."

Williams notes supplier partnerships are also key to success.

Unlimited Services practices lean manufacturing and maintains short

PROFILE

Unlimited Services Inc.
www.us-wire-harness.com
2005 sales: \$20 million
Headquarters: Oconto, Wis.
Employees: 350
Products: Wire harnesses and cable assemblies
William Kessenich: "We value the partnerships we've formed with our customers."



An Unlimited Services panel department employee assembles a control box.

▷ lead times. Its global suppliers must be in line with JIT methods to keep operations running smoothly.

Shared Values

"WE LOOK FOR CUSTOMERS AND SUPPLIERS THAT ARE ALSO lean because that common understanding helps us all be successful," Unlimited Services Vice President Tom Breen notes. "A lot of companies look at lean only from a manufacturing point of view, but we've worked hard to also develop the cultural aspect. There is a big difference in thinking that way, and we've found that philosophy to be successful."

Kessenich notes supply chain management "doesn't mean beating suppliers up for the best price." The entire supply chain needs to look for ways to eliminate waste from the process. "As a link in that chain, we need to be efficient ourselves," he continues.

Lean Journey

UNLIMITED SERVICES BEGAN THE LEAN JOURNEY IN 1996, AND made major improvements by 1998, such as offering JIT shipping and replenishment programs. "We shortened turnaround and lead time, and tried to improve our organization by engaging employees in kaizen initiatives," Kessenich explains. "We cleaned up our process and took waste out. We continue to use the tools of lean to improve our processes."

Unlimited Services has found lean initiatives have fostered democracy in the workplace. Kessenich notes employees are empowered to make changes if they lead to process improve-

ments. "If someone on the floor needs a cart to move materials faster, for example, they can just go ahead and purchase the cart and make that change," he says. "Up to \$300, employees don't need to consult with the production manager."

"In fact," he continues, "the production manager Ray Sweeney tells people to fail quickly and often so that we can correct the process and make it right. This is very much the culture we thrive on. Many companies take away the freedom of the employees and the ability to get the job done. We stay out of the way."

Empowering Employees

UNLIMITED SERVICES IS STRUCTURED AS AN UPSIDE-DOWN pyramid, with management on the bottom, serving to support the employees on the front lines. Kessenich stresses employees need to be empowered to service the customer because they are responsible for the company's success.

Williams says the hands-off approach has created excitement on the shop floor. Customers, as well, benefit from employee involvement. "If a customer has a question on the status of a project, they call the shop floor," he explains. "There's no filtering through a series of departments. People on the shop floor speak with the customers and make the call on our production schedule."

Kessenich stresses the importance of listening to employees and respecting their input. Greater employee participation leads to greater job ownership, he notes.

Incentives for Success

EMPLOYEES ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR SCHEDULING OVERTIME, AND they notify management when the workload warrants hiring additional staff. Cross-training also helps cultivate a team atmosphere and allows employees to "move where the work is," Kessenich says.

Williams explains a gain-sharing system helps "incentive-ize" employees to meet shipping times, and improve accuracy and productivity. "This helps all our employees feel like entrepreneurs," he notes. "These rewards drive performance."

As a result of its practices, Unlimited Services has reached a record year in gross sales, and has won top-supplier awards. "We've retained all our existing customers and won some old customers back," Williams notes. "Right now, we're in an acquisition mode and are exploring potential relationships for the positive effects synergy creates," Kessenich concludes. ■

INDUSTRIAL ELECTRIC CO.

Industrial Electric believes that partnership is more than a word. The employee/owners of the company are committed to delivering the right product, on-time, each and every day. Providing value-added solutions are critical to the success of its partner Unlimited Services. Industrial Electric "has its customers covered" by being customer-driven and solution-focused.

GEM GRAVURE CO. INC.

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