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The Argus Edge: A Profile of Argus Industries

When first you enter into the Winnipeg headquarters of Argus Industries nothing seems abnormal: a clean and welcoming waiting area with courteous reception, attractive furniture, and an interesting assortment of magazines, but take a few steps into the office corridor and you begin to feel an unanticipated pulse, an attractive energy that tells you something here goes far beyond what you might expect from a typical manufacturing business—but more on that later.

Argus Industries is a manufacturing company with an exciting edge. Based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada; Argus has been providing quality elastomeric products since 1962. Today, among other things, they manufacture a variety of high-tech injection molded rubber and plastic products, custom die-cut gasket seals, and CNC machined metal parts for aerospace, military, and industrial customers around the world. Argus has positioned itself with a diverse range of product capabilities from the high quality rubber tie-down straps known as the “Snappi-Hooker” to military projects that cannot be discussed. This is an impressive accomplishment when you consider that when Bill Easton purchased Argus Industries in 1980 the business employed five people working out of a 6000 square foot facility. At the time 50 percent of the company’s sales were portable and chemical toilets (Sawka) but Bill Easton saw the potential of industrial injection molding and today—with sales exceeding \$12 million—the company has 80 employees operating from a 28,000 square foot manufacturing facility, another 20,000 square foot metal fabrication division across the street, and a 5000 square foot branch plant in Pickering, Ontario, Canada.

Essential to the growth and success of Argus Industries is the desire to improve in all areas of the operation. This same desire drove Argus to be one of Canada's first companies certified as both a ISO9100:2000 and AS9100 manufacturer to the Aerospace / Military Industry.

“The AS9100 certification helps us maximize our systems and configuration management ensuring the products and services we offer are of the highest quality (Argus Industries).” OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) aerospace leaders recognized AS9100 as the best aerospace quality standard in the world today. Annual audits are required to maintain the AS9100 certification and that drives continual improvements to raise the manufacturing standards even further.

In order to meet the strict standards for quality and consistency demanded by the aerospace industry Argus operates technologically advanced injection molding equipment producing elastomeric products that are superior in quality and consistency at a molecular level when compared with products made using a compression molding process. “We mold a variety of high grade, high spec elastomeric compounds such as specialty Silicones, Fluoro Silicone, Viton, and other aerospace compounds. Some of our current aerospace molded parts include Window Seals, Fuel Tank Seals, Wing Fuel Tank Seals, and many styles of bulkhead seals (Argus Industries).” The combination of modern injection machines with touch screen programming and a strict, 100 percent, inspection policy in the Aerospace Molding Division ensure all parts are produced with the best possible quality, in tolerance, every time.

As a longtime (tier one) supplier to the aerospace industry, Argus has developed and adopted “LEAN” manufacturing processes that guarantee value, efficiency, and consistency from their products while minimizing needless transportation of goods, production downtimes, production

over-runs, and defects from the manufacturing process. Remarkably these processes are also agile enough to respond to any urgent aerospace requirements. Highly trained staff and a variety of specialty high-grade materials on hand mean that Argus can deliver rush orders and emergency AOG (aircraft on ground) orders on time.

While the product quality and manufacturing innovation at Argus Industries is inspiring the true “Argus edge” is their ability to create happy employees, satisfied customers, and solid partnerships. The aforementioned energy that one notices, upon entering the office corridor, can be traced directly back to these employees—also known as “the Argus Tribe”. The leader of the Tribe—Argus’s president Mike Easton—took over in 2010 and set to work reinforcing the already firm foundation with improvements to the LEAN manufacturing processes and an ambitious overhaul of the company’s corporate culture.

Mike describes the Argus corporate model as an inverted pyramid wherein the traditional corporate hierarchy is turned upside-down. In this model, management focuses on making sure employees have what they need to accomplish a task. Employees are empowered with the ability to affect change and take action based on a set of directives (W D Adkins). “The one thing that was missing was a ‘what would the president do here?’ button” says Easton, so Argus’s corporate model now encourages employees to take ownership and make day-to-day decisions providing they are aligned with the following six directives:

1. Maintain a respectful, positive tribal culture
2. Give the customer the right product, at the right time, exactly the way they want it
3. Grow tribe members (which refers to personal improvement)
4. Maintain world-class systems and processes

5. Make it easier to do business with Argus (internally and externally)
6. Increase profitability

For example: if an employee questions what to do with a perfectly good part that came off production slightly off colour, he or she only need refer to the second corporate directive to find the answer: Give the customer the right product, at the right time, exactly the way they want it (Easton).

Placing the employees at the top of the pyramid requires more than just a set of directives; it requires a commitment of trust, time, and training by the management to provide the necessary skills in decision-making and communication. The outcomes from this model help to strengthen the Tribe because decisions can be made without disrupting others and employees are able to act with integrity without fear of reprimand. The latter establishing a pride of ownership within the Tribe that leads to (among other things) happier employees and more fulfilling careers.

A walk-through of the manufacturing facility with Mike Easton demonstrates that the methods are working, there is a genuine lightness in the air, employees greet their president enthusiastically and he responds equally. Information boards openly display the company's goals and progress for Tribe members to review. Another board is used to request training so that Tribe members, motivated to learn more, have a clear path to achieve their goals. The company's newsletter features announcements like "book your lunch with the president today" and feature weekly "lunch & learn" events that introduce the Tribe to educational talks and documentaries on their breaks intended to stimulate the mind. It's impossible not to feel inspired by the positive workplace atmosphere.

When the inverted pyramid is successful the Tribe can thrive, and like leaves on a tree; reveal the true beauty of the company to the customers and partners they come into contact with everyday.

When more serious problems inevitably arise, Argus engages another tool in uniform problem solving methodology titled: “The APS (Argus Problem Solving) Process.” “This process is designed to resolve issues that require the participation of employees from different areas of the organization or when the root of the problem is unknown. (Argus Industries)”

Some benefits of the APS process include:

- Improving each team’s understanding of their responsibility
- Demonstrating the team’s ability to generate ideas and implement improvements
- Repositioning problems as challenges

With APS, the ability to efficiently resolve problems improves because before the process can begin the right people from the right areas must be at the table along with the knowledge and experience each person has of his or her area. If the APS process leads to a difficult decision, the group can refer back to the six corporate directives for guidance. For example: if a customer in Montreal has a problem and an Argus product may or may not be at fault, the team can take note that directive #5 (Make it easier to do business with Argus) comes before #6 (Increase profitability) and make a decision based on the guidance of directive #5.

Argus’s commitment to excel beyond the norm has not gone without notice. In 2007 their peers in the Manitoba Aerospace Industry presented them with the Award for Excellence in Quality and Teamwork and the following year Argus received the Manitoba Business Quality, Best Practices Award.

With an innovative spirit and the palpable energy of the Tribe, Mike Easton and Argus Industries are looking toward a solid future. Corporate mantras like “Make tomorrow better than today” and “Together as one tribe” are not just slick phrases at Argus, they’re the ingredients of a mindset that give the Tribe, their customers, and their business partners the Argus Edge.

Works Cited

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