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Auma's Southpointe plant sees continued growth in automated valve market

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Bob Kachur, foreground, operations manager at Auma's Southpointe plant, and Rich Oaks, marketing manager, say the future looks bright for the company's automated actuator business, which supplies electronically controlled valves to customers in numerous industries across North America. (GREG TARR/O-R)

When Auma moved its American production plant from Robinson Township to Southpointe two years ago, the company saw it as an opportunity to plan for future growth as well as to make improvements in its manufacturing process.

Auma, a German-owned company, makes electric actuators that sit atop valve gearboxes and turn the valves open or closed in a wide range of industrial applications: power plants, water treatment plants, chemical and petrochemical processes, steel works and in the food and beverage industry.

While the company has been making its product in the U.S. since 1976, its German owners were confident when it came to seeking a new site that would accommodate future growth, according to Rich Oaks, Auma's marketing manager.

"They said, 'Don't think in terms of expanding 30 to 40 percent, think in terms of doubling capacity for the future,'" Oaks said.

When the company moved into the building formerly occupied by Bayside Automation, it got 35,000 square feet of assembly area as well as another 22,000 square feet for future expansion.

Despite the extra space, Auma wasn't interested in squandering it on far-flung, inefficient production.

In addition to adding office space in the building, the company took advantage of the opportunity to incorporate many of the principles of "lean manufacturing," a production efficiency philosophy originally developed in Japan and now used by companies all over the world.

Where the plant originally used a long belt that moved assemblies through the entire production process, operations manager Bob Kachur broke up the various assembly functions into smaller groups. In place of long tables, he either shortened the work area or constructed U-shaped areas that enable a trio of assemblers to move between tasks and assemble different types of actuators from different orders. The new scheme also provides for testing of the electronic components at various points of assembly.

Auma also purchased a vertical "lean lift" shuttle, a two-story automated unit consisting of 50 rotating shelves that enable efficient storage and quick access to about 1,000 different components used in the manufacturing process. In the rear of the plant, where large components are stored, Brian Weaver, the plant's manufacturing engineer, was able to redesign

the area into a vertically stacked system of crates that helped to save 30 percent of the space.

The reconfigured assembly and storage areas and the automated inventory system "puts the stock right where the person is using it," Kachur said, noting that the strategy helps the company move from an older process where orders were made in batches to one that enables the output of multiple orders while turning out better quality products.

Many of the operating improvements at the local plant have caught the attention of the German owners, who have a factory in Muellheim, Germany, as well as another plant in India.

When the Southpointe plant purchased a new lathe that improved the output time for various valves, the managers also demonstrated to the owners that they could source high-quality castings from the U.S. instead of Germany. Kachur noted that the plant also replaced a natural gas-fired dryer for painted parts with a more efficient infrared dryer that's less expensive to operate. He said Auma is considering making the same change at its plant in Germany.

A big reason for the improved efficiencies here is the continued growth of the automated valve industry, which appeals to those working in industries where operations often take place in hazardous environments.

"More and more products are automated these days," Oaks said. While all of Auma's actuators are equipped with a manual wheel for turning valves in emergencies, they're rarely used.

"Companies want well-trained workers operating their equipment and they want to do it from a central control panel rather than sending someone out to turn valves manually," Oaks said. The company also makes programmable actuators that require little human interaction.

The automated actuator also is seeing a growing demand throughout the world.

While the Southpointe plant, which employs 91 people, supplies customers throughout North America, Oaks and Kachur noted that many valve manufacturers, including some of their own customers, are now exporting actuator-equipped valves to places like China.

"The future for a product like this looks very bright," Oaks said. "The prospects are very good."

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