GR Spring & Stamping holds on to its people. The 2011 Precision Metalforming Association Benchmarking Report has the proof. It lists GRS&S as Best in Class for turnover, at 40 percent below the industry average, dropping from an already exceptionally low 10 percent turnover in 2009 to 7 percent in 2011. The metalformer also boasts Best in Class designations for setup time, machine utilization and sales per employee. So it should be no wonder that GRS&S also snagged a Best in Class designation for training. In fact, the company has earned industry awards based on the number of hours spent on training, and also has won several national awards for associate training and education.

Training and improvement programs, combined with a successful market shift, mean bright days for this Western Michigan metalformer. How bright? Since FY2009, when sales dropped by 26 percent in the midst of a general manufacturing freefall, GRS&S rebounded with annual sales increases averaging 29 percent. The growth continues with the company launching five major product families in FY2012, totaling 330 parts with many slated for hybrid and battery-powered vehicles.

More than 90 percent of the company’s 450 local employees partake of its World Class Idea program, which invites suggestions on improvements in each employee’s sphere of work. These reasons and more are why, in a confidential survey, 91 percent of GRS&S employees gave the company a high degree of trust. Thus it’s no wonder why GRS&S is named a Hitachi Foundation Pioneer Award winner.

“Workforce development has changed drastically from the late-1970s, when business owners were afraid to provide educational programming for their associates because many worried that associates would leave and the company would lose out,” says Jim Zawacki, GRS&S chairman. “We launched associate-development programs in the mid-1980s when we realized we had to provide more growth opportunities for associates if we wanted them to stay. By elevating our associates through workforce development, GRS&S was able to develop many new and difficult processes, which helped the company grow from 50 associates 20 years ago to the several hundred we have today.”

The growth in employment at GRS&S has been dramatic, as these recent numbers show:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

New Direction Pays Off

GRS&S primarily produces stampings and related assemblies using transfer and progressive dies in capacities to capacities of 1000 tons. With 99.5 percent of business serving the automotive market, GRS&S products feed OEMs and Tier One suppliers.

In the mid-1990s, the company decided to focus on larger value-added parts and sought to develop relationships with Japanese automotive companies. With the product shift in full force, the last decade has seen GRS&S triple its sales to $100 million, with several years running of 25-percent growth. The explosive growth has netted more than 300 new employees in just the past 30 months, according to company officials.
Technology Pushes Training

The change in part focus also brought the need for new equipment. In the past four years alone, GRS&S has spent $16 million on new equipment and technology. That includes $6.8 million invested in the first six months of FY2012. Since the late-1990s GRS&S has added 10 large presses, and in the last two years funded transfer systems to the tune of $2.5 million. Other new technologies brought in to support the paradigm shift toward larger parts and assemblies include robotic-welding cells, in-die welding and assembly capabilities, a new Plex ERP system, and software for tooling design and stamping simulation.

To keep pace with its new equipment and personnel additions, GRS&S has developed robust education and training programs. These programs, including GRS&S University, Life Long Education, internships and apprenticeships, have increased employees’ skill sets and the size of their paychecks. The company developed GRS&S University, for example, to help press-department associates learn correct techniques surrounding all aspects of press operation and safety.

New GRS&S associates begin their careers in the classroom. During their first week, each press-department associate receives 12 hr. of classroom instruction combined with 28 hr. of on-the-job training. All GRS&S associates complete at least 16 hr. of initial training, including general orientation and quality, followed by at least 10 hr. of annual recurring training.

Successful completion of GRS&S University raises the associates’ skill levels, resulting in a 4- to 6-percent pay increase within the first 180 days of employment. In 2011, the company hired 15 press operators who have completed GRS&S University and have earned the pay increase, according to company officials.

In addition, GRS&S numbers show that the university training has significantly reduced the amount of unplanned maintenance occurring in the plant, and helped reduce the number of injuries in the press department. Injury rates are well below the industry average, and the company has not had a lost-time injury in more than 2 yr.

“The University, providing instruction half-a-day, four days per week, helps a lot in training new employees,” says training manager Rose Jonaitis. “We bring in a lot of employees without experience in their field, so we can teach them with a fresh start. They are not bringing any bad habits from a prior press manufacturing job.”

Though turnover at GRS&S is extremely low as compared to other metalformers, turnover does in fact occur. When the company does hire replacements or to fill new positions, “we are more concerned about the person’s attitude then his or her current abilities,” explains Dale Dulyea, safety manager and continuous-improvement manager. “GRS&S University allows us to increase the skill level of our new hires faster than...
“This company cares about what employees think and provides opportunities for them to grow,” says Bradley Meulenberg, tooling-build department lead. “I got married three months after I started here, and the company chairman visited me personally and gave me a wedding card.”

we had been able to do previously.”

Jonaitis began at the company in 1976 in an entry-level position, moved on to secondary operations—now called the value added department—eventually led that department. In 2001 she took on the newly created position of training manager.

“I started at the bottom and worked my way up,” she says. “I like conducting the orientation and performing one-on-one and group training. You can see the light bulb turn on, and that is fun to watch.”

Life Long Education classes—some elective, some mandatory—are held several times each month, all related to improving the company’s key performance indicators: quality, cost, delivery, safety, morale and environmental. Some classes target specialty technical areas such as welding, automation, and terms and conditions.

Homegrown Talent Recognized

New hires are paid commensurate with experience, and receive raises based on performance, competency and training progression.

“We are not a company that sticks by seniority,” explains Dulyea. “We are performance-based.”

Pay ranges remain competitive but allow press operators to earn significantly more than their starting hourly wages, sometimes in as little as two to three years, depending on an associate’s ability and contribution to the company. Many GRS&S toolmakers have earned journeyman status at the company, and wage progressions reflect such achievement.

And 12 of the company’s engineers began as interns and have graduated to become program managers, with two having earned master’s degrees while employed at GRS&S.

The company prefers to promote from within whenever possible.

Forty-five percent of salaried associates were promoted from their starting positions at GRS&S, and four of eight senior-staff associates were promoted from within the company. Currently, 50 percent of the hourly workforce has been promoted to higher positions with higher wages. Also, each year, performance reviews lead to wage adjustments. For example, in 2012, 70 percent of associates have received 5 percent wage increases, 15 percent received adjustments from 6 to 10 percent, and 5 to 10 percent of employees received higher adjustments, according to company officials.

Benefits and wages at GRS&S are competitive with similar Western Michigan businesses. Benefits include 401(k) matching, medical and life insurance, holiday and vacation pay, attendance bonuses, and gain sharing—paid quarterly—based on company profitability.

When GRS&S describes itself as a performance-based company, it is performance that determines promotions and layoffs, according to Dulyea.

“Seniority has its place for vacation time,” he explains. “But at GRS&S, when layoffs occur we will...
not line our people up on a scale of seniority and start at the bottom. We distinguish between our best performers, good performers and low performers."

Cross Training via Mini-Companies

While many organizations seek a cross-functional workforce, GRS&S goes the extra mile. The company operates several cross-functional teams referred to as mini-companies.

"A mini company is a term and activity we learned from a consultant, Kiyoshi Suzaki, in the early 1990s," explains Dulyea. "He visited GRS&S quarterly for several years, and helped us develop the mini-company concept and improve our lines of communication. Our goal was to have every production department run as a company; thus strengthening customer-supplier relationships and providing a vital check-and-balance mechanism."

Each mini-company at GRS&S has specific internal and external customers, with the goal to ensure that no mini-company passes along a defect to any downstream customer. Another goal: improve the lines of communication—giving each associate a place to voice concerns and opinions.

Each mini-company meets weekly—with all associates participating—to review key performance indicators and conduct problem solving. A minimum of three officers from manufacturing, quality and technical departments lead the mini-companies (see Pressroom Mini-Company at GRS&S sidebar), and each week all mini-company officers meet to share best practices, review the key performance indicators and discuss implemented improvements. Each quarter, mini-companies meet with management in what are called bankers meetings. Here they review results relating to the key performance indicators and discuss plans to improve. These meetings also allow for requests for capital expenditures.

Mini-company officers generally are promoted from within their areas. Officer positions allow associates to increase leadership and management skills, which result in increased wages. To help officers grow into their positions, the company offers a variety of internal and external leadership courses.

To further communicate best practices within each mini-company, GRS&S holds an annual trade show. Here, mini-companies within each building videotape of some best practices and new technologies, which are then viewed by members of other mini-companies at the trade show to promote idea-sharing.

Associates receive other perks that make GRS&S an attractive place to work. They don't bother punching in and out, as the company has eliminated timeclocks. Associates simply write their hours on personal timesheets that are turned in to supervisors at the end of the week. The company also provides loans whereby associates can purchase new home computers. Money is repaid through interest-free payroll deductions. As many as 25 associates annually take advantage of this program, and the company benefits as well—approximately 90 percent of associates must interact with a computer at one time or another during the work day, so computer proficiency adds work knowledge.

Company Culture Fosters Improvement

The GRS&S World Class Idea program, based on the Toyota Suggestion System, taps the knowledge of associates to drive continuous improvement. Company-wide meetings held
Quality Training Brings Quality Career

Jennifer Robinson, management representative-supplier quality, started at GRS&S in 1999 in the shipping department. “From the beginning, I wanted to learn everything I could,” she says. That willingness to learn propelled her to a shipping lead position. Interested in a posted quality position, Robinson was recommended for the job by her boss. The transfer to quality led her, through the company’s tuition-reimbursement program, to college courses where she is working toward a degree in quality engineering.

Responsible for more than 100 GRS&S suppliers, and also an ISO and TS representative, Robinson’s compensation has gone from hourly to salaried, which doubled her pay. “If you have the desire and drive, there is always room to grow here,” she says. “There is openness here. You see the president and chairman of the company on the shop floor, which never happened at my former employer. And we have meetings where management explains where every dollar goes.”

“And, there are no time clocks…are you kidding me?” Robinson exclaims. “That is a level of trust on behalf of the company that I want to keep.”

Mary Dulyea is an administrative assistant in GRS&S’s pressroom mini-company as an annual goal of 28 fully implemented improvements per person.

“We track these and review progress at both our quarterly bankers meetings and at our company-wide WCI meetings, held every six weeks,” he says.

The number of suggestions approved ties to a dollar amount given out at an annual company holiday party. Buy-in on programs such as World Class Idea is a big reason why GRS&S has remained profitable while averaging 1 to 2-percent cost downs annually (value-added only) on existing sales.

GRS&S fosters goodwill among associates in other ways, too. Weekly department meetings pass along management information, review department performance, promote problem solving and allow feedback from associates. This kind of communication lets associates know that they have a voice in company matters. In addition, quarterly business reviews share profit/loss statements, information on new business contracts, safety performance and a general ‘state of the company.

“Communication is critical to building trust,” says Dulyea, “so associates are always provided with company information. Very little is sacred here.”

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