

DeKalb County leaders talk manufacturing growth

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SYCAMORE – Jim James poses a challenge to his employees daily: Think of ways to put Ideal Industries out of business.

“We are continuously looking at things that would put us out of business,” said James, the CEO of Sycamore-based Ideal Industries. “We look at our products and say, 'If I wanted to put us out of business, what would I do?' ”

The strategy appears to have worked for Ideal, of which James has been the CEO since 2008. He succeeded David Juday, a member of the family that founded the company in 1916.

Remaining a competitive manufacturer for nearly a century has required Ideal Industries to stay flexible and adapt to the changes brought on by more technology and outsourcing. Ideal employs about 335 people; in 2007, DeKalb County had 4,752 manufacturing jobs overall.

Those workers help produce the many goods created by local firms, some of which are profiled in today's special section, "[Made In DeKalb County](#)."

Overall, manufacturing jobs comprise the largest private, for-profit business sector and the largest driver of gross domestic product in the county, Paul Borek, executive director of the DeKalb County Economic Development Corp., said.

Although manufacturing still dominates the private, for-profit sector, the number of manufacturing jobs has decreased in the county as it has across the country as manufacturers adopt more technology. But those are the types of jobs the DCEDC wants to attract, as those jobs tend to be better paying than other job sectors.

"We work with local companies to identify needs and opportunities and connect them with resources to support their expansion, to support their improvements and training and education," Borek said. "We also market DeKalb County to site selectors and industrial [real estate agents] to attract new companies to DeKalb County."

Northern Illinois University and KishHealth System are large public and nonprofit employers, respectively, but within the private sector, the number of retail and health and social services jobs are growing, Borek said. The median pay for retail and health and social services jobs is much lower than

the median pay for manufacturing jobs, according to a December 2010 study by Northern Illinois University's Center for Governmental Studies.

Other high-paying job sectors are management, construction, finance and insurance, but those sectors had fewer jobs locally.

Within manufacturing, technology is the biggest driving force behind the changes in the industry, James said.

Advances such as computer numeric-controlled machinery and 3D printing have changed the skills they look for in employees. Rather than looking for someone who can craft products, the company now has to look for someone who can run the computer-aided design program used on a 3D printer, for instance.

In many cases, James said, hiring now is more about passion and drive than a manufacturing background.

“We're not waiting for the world to train our people,” James said. “We are going to train them.”

J. Walter Becker founded Ideal Industries in 1916 and moved to Sycamore in 1923. The company started out making dresser stones with the idea that every product should be worth more than the price paid for it. Now the company produces more than 6,000 products. While it is mostly known for products in the wire and nuts category, those products account for only a portion of the company's sales.

"Our product line has grown substantially," James said.

James explained 90 percent of Ideal products are made in the United States. The other 10 percent, which is produced overseas, is for sale overseas, James said. He noted not all manufacturers have a similar split in products produced in the U.S., but the tides are starting to turn.

“I think what companies are starting to realize is, chasing the low wage is not the best strategy,” James said.

Despite the decrease in jobs, productivity and revenue have increased in manufacturing. In the past four years, 22 manufacturers have either moved to DeKalb County or expanded their operations, Borek said.

“Manufacturing is a significant element to the economy,” Borek said. “While the number of jobs have decreased, manufacturing is stronger than ever.”

'Made In DeKalb County'

A 24-page special section spotlighting some of the unique products made in DeKalb County and used around the world. Inside today.