



AFTER HOURS

A tweet-up benefiting Toys for Tots was held at the Iron Horse Hotel Dec. 7. **A17**



SCOTT PAULUS

Eric Isbister (with Mary Isbister) . . . "If you have trained people and you provide them with information, they make better decisions."

**LESSONS
 LEARNED**

BY ERIC ISBISTER

WHAT ARE THE MOST DAUNTING ISSUES FACING YOUR FIRM RIGHT NOW?

"Our growth is throttled by being able to obtain enough new employees who know or want to learn our profession. At this time, the lack of welders is causing us to have to turn work away to our competitors."

WHAT IS YOUR FIVE-YEAR VISION?

"Grow GenMet at a rate that keeps us ahead of the material price increases, health care increases, insurance increases and tax rate increases, while entering into design engineering fields of alternate energy."

WHAT IS YOUR GREATEST FRUSTRATION?

"I see a decline in integrity. People need to be proud of themselves. People who come to work need to realize that they need to add value."

WHAT'S BEEN YOUR BEST BUSINESS DECISION?

"Asking my wife to come to work with me."

Depending on employee input

Mequon manufacturer involves workers in key decisions

BY STACY VOGEL DAVIS
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GenMet Corp. has two "retired" jerseys hanging in its Mequon facility honoring two long-time employees.

As it happens, both employees returned to the company after retirement.

The retired jerseys, and the fact that the employees have come back to work for GenMet, illustrates the value the company places on its employees and those employees' loyalty to the metal fabricator.

"The success at GenMet is driven by everybody that works here," said Missy Propper, the company's operations manager.

Manufacturing has been somewhat of a bright spot in an otherwise stagnant Milwaukee-area economy and GenMet is no exception. The company has seen rapid growth in the past

three months, especially from its largest customer, Oshkosh Corp. It has hired 10 people as a result, bringing its total to 70, and would hire a dozen more welders if it could find enough skilled workers, CEO Eric Isbister said.

The company manufactures metal parts for military and commercial customers.

Isbister and his wife, GenMet president Mary Isbister, bought the company in 1999. Between 1999 and 2008 the couple grew annual revenue from \$3 million to \$12.6 million mainly through investing in automation and advanced equipment, while at the same time adding 10 employees, Eric Isbister said.

He expects revenue of \$10.5 million in 2010, up from \$10 million in 2009. Most of the growth has come in the last quarter of the year, he said.

The company gets the most possible out of its workers by involving them in day-to-day decisions and encouraging them to learn new skills, Isbister said. Managers post information about each day's orders and sales on a wall of the plant, showing workers how they're contributing to GenMet's bottom line. Once a week, the entire staff meets to discuss sales,

safety issues and other topics.

"If you have trained people and you provide them with information, they make better decisions," Isbister said.

The company keeps files of employees with a "smart card" for each skill they have based on a system used by the U.S. Navy, Isbister said. Employees are encouraged to get more cards, and the company often provides on-site training.

TRAINING FOCUS

Besim Huskanovic started at GenMet as a welder two years ago. Since then, he has learned laser, software, brake press, shipping and other skills. Now, he can go wherever he's needed, he said.

"We focus on training as much as we can here," Huskanovic said. "I've enjoyed every minute of it."

Russ Kleinert, a welder who has worked at GenMet for five years, said the company seeks employees' opinions on everything from bidding on jobs to purchasing equipment.

"The employees steer (the company)," he said. "It's different from most companies."

GenMet often consults employees before accepting a job to make sure they can get the

job done in time, Isbister said, noting how the company prides itself on on-time delivery.

Customers said they know they can trust GenMet to deliver on time.

"They don't take on any more work than they can handle and they don't make promises or make commitments that they can't back up," said Gary Monroe, senior vice president at Frank Mayer & Associates Inc., a Grafton seller of in-store displays.

Randy Nick, vice president of operations at Butler Wire & Metal Products Inc. in Menomonee Falls, acknowledged GenMet's attention to quality customer service.

"They constantly follow up," he said. "After they do a job, (the company vice president) calls up and makes sure everything is fine."

The Isbisters also are active in the community, especially when it comes to teaching children about manufacturing. They support programs such as Junior Achievement and Project Lead the Way, and Eric Isbister serves on the board of Waukesha County Technical College and Milwaukee School of Engineering.

"(We) show kids that manufacturing has good careers," he said.