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Union Special: A stitch in time

HUNTLEY – While the rest of the industrial sewing machine manufacturing industry has moved operations offshore, Huntley's Union Special has stitched a niche in the market by utilizing the power of life-long work experience.

The average length of employment among the 120 Union Special employees is 26 years.

"We have people who have been here 40, 50 years," President Terry Hitpas said. "The experience that we have here is something that we rely on to continue to produce in a very productive way."

The 131-year-old manufacturer supplies industrial-strength sewing machines and sewing machine parts to other manufacturers. It moved to Huntley in 1948, and then experienced rapid growth during the next four decades. When the Japanese company Juki bought Union Special in the late 1980s, the company employed about 2,000 people spread out at locations within the country and on foreign soil.

Union Special now operates solely at the 418,000-square-foot plant in Huntley. It became private again in 2008 when Hitpas and his two partners, Vice President of Operations Lance Lamb and Vice President of Manufacturing Tom Bartel, took ownership.

The business became significantly smaller by 2008. Union Special previously held a large portion of the apparel industry market, but those companies began seeking out cheaper alternatives from foreign manufacturers.

"It became harder to compete with them on the world stage," Hitpas said. "So our business shrunk as a result."

The company now focuses on making seven types of sewing machines, the most prominent of which is a machine that closes large bags of products like dog food or potatoes – at 3,000 stitches per minute.

"It's a lot of dollars that they have invested that they need to turn into (more) dollars," Lamb said of the companies who buy from Union Special. "So they don't necessarily look for the cheap, non-U.S. options, they're looking for the similar quality that their products are. That has helped our company – they want to use the high quality equipment."

Hitpas echoed that sentiment. He said Union Special, in its current form, markets to the higher end companies who want the greatest combination of speed, quality and durability.

"We've relied on continuing to make quality machines that, though it's higher priced than our competitors, customers know what they're getting when they buy Union Special machines," Hitpas said. "They're buying the best machine."

That reputation has helped the company add 12 employees in the last year. And it's still hiring.

But it's not easy to replace a life of experience.

"Our number one resource is and always has been the people," Lamb said. "These people are skilled. It's the kind of product that you have to have knowledge. You can't have robots build these things."

Partner the workforce skill with the reputation Union Special has established in the manufacturing community, and Lamb sees reason to expect more success in the future.

"Those are the things that have been able to keep us going," he said. "And those are the things we've got to build on for the next 130 years plus."



Union Special workers from left Mike Conro of Hampshire, Angie Brooks of Genoa and Bill Valentine of Lake in the Hills work the sewing machine assembly line at the facility in Huntley. Union Special is the oldest, largest and last industrial sewing machine manufacturing company remaining in the United States. (H. Rick Bamman - hbamman@shawmedia.com) (H. Rick Bamman)

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