



30 robots, no layoffs

Shawnee's GF Central Plastics produces fittings for natural gas industry



OK INNOVATIONS

SHAWNEE — On the manufacturing floor here at GF Central Plastics, a giant yellow arm with a claw-like “hand” surges forward, grips a length of plastic tubing, lifts it high into the air before swiveling and inserting it precisely into a slot.

The arm then reaches down, exchanges its hand for another and picks up yet another molded plastic piece and places it on a conveyor belt. The entire routine is completed in less than 30 seconds.

That's life for one of about 30 robotic arms operating at Shawnee's GF Central Plastics, fabricator of plastic and metal fittings and one of Oklahoma's largest manufacturers.

No breaks. No rest period. No quitting time.

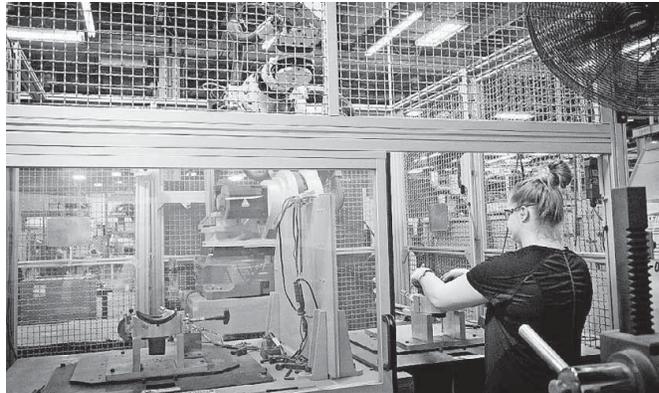
Operating from a 500,000-square-foot facility on Shawnee's south side, GF Central Plastics employs about 500 people who produce plastic and metal fittings, as well as specialty parts primarily for the natural gas industry.

The robotic arms employed in the process never stop, repeating their assignment 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Their human co-workers are busy ensuring the machines have needed parts to work with, as well as inspecting and packaging finished pieces.

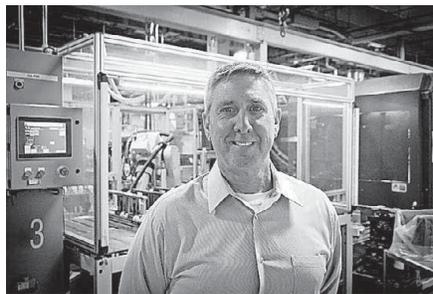
“The primary goal of the robotics and automation is not to eliminate people, but allow us to continue to grow and continue to improve the quality of our products,” said Bryan Lucas, GF Central Plastics vice president for operations.

“To date, in the 10 years we've been employing the automation and robotics, we've never had to have a layoff as a result of that automation.”

Central Plastics was founded in Shawnee 62 years ago by Mel Pourchot



Many automated machine workcells were added over the last 24 months at GF Central Plastics in Shawnee. Robots also have the ability to perform operations that require a degree of repeatability that humans cannot offer. (PHOTOS PROVIDED)



Mark Smith is managing director and president of GF Central Plastics.

and remained a privately held family business until it was sold in 2008 to Swiss-based GF Corp., which operates piping systems, automotive and machining solutions divisions worldwide.

Mark Smith is managing director and president of Georg Fischer Central Plastics in Shawnee.

“Today, GF Central Plastics is one of the larger and more profitable organizations within piping systems of the GF organization,” Smith said. “We operate primarily under the utility market segment, which is the natural gas side of our business, as well as water and energy segments, the two dominant markets we are pursuing today.”

GF Central Plastics doesn't manufacture the gas meters that connect to homes; rather it makes all of the fittings that connect the gas system and meters to the end users.

“Some examples of customers that we service are natural gas utilities that provide natural gas to homes, like ONEOK, Centerpoint and Atmos

Energy,” Smith said. “We also do work with Devon Energy and a number of pipeline manufacturers that are in the area.”

Low profile, high impact

Despite a large workforce and an innovative, high-tech manufacturing floor, GF Central Plastics maintains a low profile in the central Oklahoma area, Smith said.

“We are one of the largest manufacturers in the area, if not the largest in the local Shawnee area, and a lot of people don't even know who we are,” he said.

The company has two major expansion projects underway.

“We are increasing our warehouse space by approximately 35 percent,” Lucas said. “We are also adding about a 12,000-square-foot sales and technical training center and R&D center.”

What that translates into is more job opportunities.

“We are bringing in new talent from the engi-

neering fields right now,” Smith said. “I think it's important that we have a good work environment, we have good benefits and probably most important is we are a very stable and strong company and we are growing.”

The company employs about 20 engineers and up to 100 people with hard-to-find technical skills.

“We are increasing our engineering staff to accommodate a very, very significant growth in new product development,” Lucas said.

Smith and Lucas spoke in the relative quiet of GF Central Plastics testing lab. Right outside the door, the manufacturing floor hummed with activity as the robotic machines made the same parts over and over. And over.

“One of the abilities the robots have is that I've got 24/7 operation from them,” Smith said. “They don't take vacations and they don't need to sleep like I do.”

Jim Stafford writes about Oklahoma innovation and research and development topics on behalf of the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science & Technology (OCAST).

SEE THE VIDEO



Go to Oklahoman.com to see a video about the Shawnee firm that is one of the region's largest manufacturers.