

Success in **Workforce**

Custom grinding and milling manufacturer - and its' customers - reap the benefits of embracing neurodiversity in the workplace.

PRATER INDUSTRIES



90 Employees



Bolingbrook, Illinois



www.praterindustries.com

SITUATION

Prater Industries was incorporated in 1925, and for over 94 years has engineered and manufactured custom grinding and milling equipment that services a myriad of diverse markets, running the gamut from heavy industry to food production to pharmaceuticals. In addition to the equipment itself, a significant portion of the company's revenue comes from the sale of replacement parts that Prater also designs and manufactures for the heavy-duty equipment they have previously sold, and which is often in operation for many, many decades.

For the company's first 74 years of operation, every complex engineering drawing, model, bill of material or elevation was prepared manually and stored as a hard copy, either on traditional paper or, sometimes, even more flimsy drafting paper. By the turn of the century, more than 30 filing cabinets of these documents, along with photographs, had accumulated in Prater's warehouse. As a result, Prater joined the digital revolution in 1999 and upgraded their engineering and production processes to include computerized, digital drawings of the equipment and replacement parts they produce.

This was ideal for documenting and tracking current and future projects, but still left the dilemma of what to do with those dozens of filing cabinets, containing three-quarters of a century of drawings, documents and photographs of virtually everything Prater had produced over its long, successful history. The company still needed those documents because existing customers continued to order replacement equipment and parts based on those original drawings, so for almost 20 years Prater Customer Service personnel undertook the laborious process of manually searching those hard copy files to obtain the information necessary to fill customer re-orders for older parts and other pieces of equipment that needed to be repaired or replaced. This process, in turn, had a negative impact on customer service, sales results and employee job satisfaction.

In 2016, Prater's new leadership team recognized this deficiency and saw an opportunity to improve its customers' experience, increase sales and improve Prater's engineering process by scanning and organizing these 74 years of hard-copy files into digitized ones. To accomplish this, Prater attempted to outsource and hire part time talent with little luck; it was difficult to retain talent for such repetitive responsibilities. Documents needed to be renamed and organized intelligently so the staff could easily locate the files, and it became a struggle for Prater to provide optimal customer service as the vast scope of the project and high employee turnover were working against them. The project was not moving forward quickly or efficiently enough, and the customer service team was becoming frustrated with the time it took to search for what should be right at their fingertips. In addition, Prater wanted to grow sales without having to hire more customer service staff to perform non-value-added activities such as searching through hardcopy files. They wanted to provide faster service and spend minutes instead of hours locating the information needed.

SOLUTION

For over three years, Prater Industries struggled to find employees to consistently and successfully scan, upload and organize their age-old documents. Because the job is tedious, it was difficult for Prater to retain staff. The leadership at Prater reached out to IMEC to help them solve their challenge. The IMEC expert introduced Prater leadership to the idea



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of creating a neurodiverse work environment that incorporated the autistic workforce. Companies benefit from neurodiversity in the workplace by experiencing high retention in repetitive jobs. Identifying the skillset needed and creating universal standard work around the job leads to improved universal business processes for all employees. The leadership team welcomed the idea since they have employees familiar with the autistic community, and understand the unique capabilities of persons with autism. Pete Hinzy, VP & GM of Prater Industries shared “The owners of Prater are people-centric and encourage the leadership team to help people in different ways – they are very supportive of this project.” From the onset of the project, IMEC partnered with Autism Workforce to help Prater leverage their resources and gain easy access to files. Autism Workforce helps companies align the workplace to suit employees with autism and by properly placing individuals in the appropriate positions. Dave Geslak, Founder and President of Autism Workforce, wants companies to understand the value this workforce can bring to a business. “This should not be viewed as hiring for charity,” he said “but instead looked at as a smart business decision that will drive results in productivity and reduce turnover.” It has been proven that in the right position, employees with autism are more productive and accurate than neurotypical employees. They are loyal to their employer and truly enjoy working.

This is true for Prater as well. Autism Workforce trained the Prater staff that would interact with Marice, their new neurodiverse employee, to outline communication strategies for success. They also created universal standard work and implemented visual work instructions. Autism Workforce also shared success stories of other companies who embraced a neurodiverse workforce in various departments – Inventory Control, Distribution, Actuarial Reporting, and IT – to demonstrate the wealth of skilled employees in this workforce who are underutilized. Once Prater hired a neurodiverse employee, IMEC and Autism Workforce assisted Prater with the onboarding process until productivity stabilized.

Marice has been employed for only a short period of time and is already producing far greater scans per hour than previous employees. Prater and its customers are benefitting from the many skills in this untapped workforce, thanks to a neurodiverse environment.

RESULTS

- Improved customer satisfaction
- Reduced search time from 1-3 hours to 3 minutes or less
- Reduced turnover rate
- Improved job satisfaction
- Improved employee engagement
- Improved corporate culture

“ This project not only helps Prater provide better customer service and grow sales, it provides the opportunity for someone who might not have had the chance to be part of the workforce be an integral part of the solution. ”

- Pete Hinzy, Vice President and General Manager

