

# Company adapts to change

## Keeping up with technology keeps supplier viable

Cincinnati.com | Sep 18, 2011 | Written by Mike Boyer

Acutek Automation, a supplier of factory automation and controls in Blue Ash, has changed its approach to meet changing needs of its manufacturing customers.

The small, 15-year-old company started out producing control panels and other electrical hardware for manufacturers such as GE Aviation and Honda. But today it's focused on supplying the software and programmable controls that manufacturers need to capture every piece of information about their products.

The transformation came out of necessity as businesses confronted the recession, say partners David Tryling and Susan Rodgers, who bought the company 11 years ago.

Before the recession, Acutek designed and built custom machines for businesses. But that big-ticket business virtually vanished in the past few years as companies cut expenses, forcing Acutek to eliminate about eight jobs - about half its workforce.

Today, it's using its expertise in bar codes and magnetic tracking to develop systems that can pinpoint specific information long after products have left the factory floor.

Tryling has been in the electrical automation business for 35 years. He says manufacturers always have tracked the goods they make, using lot numbers or other means. But technology such as bar codes, including newer two-dimensional Quick Response codes and magnetic card strips, allow manufacturers to collect and store data in much greater detail - down to who made the item, on what machine and when it was shipped.

"Managing and tracking that data is a true skill set. That's what we're doing," he says.

The company now employs eight and has annual sales of about \$2 million.

"Our strategy all along is not to focus on any one niche," Rodgers says. The company has customers in the automotive, pharmaceutical, aerospace and consumer goods markets.

QR codes, developed initially in the auto industry in Japan, have gotten a lot of attention from retailers and others. They use the technology to deliver information to smart-phone-equipped shoppers, who scan a code on an item or sign and are instantly linked to information or a website with more details.

"You are starting to see QRs everywhere," Tryling says.

He and Rodgers say it also can be valuable to manufacturers looking to empower their workers.

"Suppose you're a maintenance man, and you walk over to a piece of equipment and it's not working. You can scan the QR code with your smart phone or a hand-held device and it will take you right to the equipment manual or product safety data sheet," Rodgers says.

Although problem-solving and consulting have been Acutek's bread and butter lately, the company is broadening its scope to provide software products it can market to customers.

"Our goal is to develop about one new product each quarter," Tryling says.

"A lot of automation houses just sell service and don't have products," he says. "We feel products provide us with the potential for repeat business."

One of the first is software for an ink-jet printing system that allows the customer to tailor the information he wants to include on product bar codes.

"It might be a lot number, or date code, or instructions or a unique logo," Tryling says.

Tryling and Rodgers say their goal is to grow sales to \$5 million a year.

"We'll let customers' orders drive growth," Rodgers says.