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FOCUS: MANUFACTURING

Aeroparts supplier PCX recruits a growing workforce in Newington



HBJ PHOTOS | PATRICIA DADDONA

PCX Aerostructures CEO Jeffrey Frisby stands in front of a state-of-the-art mill turn machine that's helped the company land new aerospace contracts.

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Enlarge image

Saban Becirovic (right), a former PCX Aerostructures intern who now works for the Newington company as a full-time computer numerical control (CNC) programmer, takes instruction from his supervisor, CNC Programming Manager Gary Knybel.

[PATRICIA DADDONA](#)

About seven years ago, Newington aeroparts supplier PCX Aerostructures reached what seemed like a pinnacle of production, with revenues peaking at \$90 million for business that included supplying parts used for government airplanes deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq.

Today, having recently landed more than \$136 million in federal contracts for work on Boeing's Apache helicopter, the company is poised to hit \$100 million in revenues next year, a new record and up from \$70 million in 2016.

"We're going to a place that we've never been," said Jeffrey Frisby, who became president and CEO in April.

PCX attributes its ability to snag military and commercial contracts with the U.S. government and private companies like Boeing, Gulfstream, Triumph Group and Bell Helicopter, to its skilled workforce.

PCX has 150 employees in its Newington facility at 300 Fenn Road, but plans to hire 30 more within the next six months.

It also has 53 employees in Texas, and is in the process of closing its Long Island plant, which employs 29, said Frisby and Craig Sullivan, PCX's vice president of human resources.

Committed to staying in Connecticut, Frisby said there is plenty of talent in the state, but also a significant hiring need among manufacturers, which has created a qualified-worker shortage.

Every aerospace company in Connecticut has employees that use the same skill set PCX is looking for — from computer numerical control (CNC) machine operators and programmers to inspectors, production control workers and manufacturing engineers, said Trevor Hartman, the company's vice president of sales and marketing.

"Everything is on an uptick, so it just constrains the market a bit," Frisby said. "Commercial's up. Defense is up, and the economy is going strong nowadays. It's not a bad problem to have."

To that end, PCX is training high school and some college students through paid internships that can lead to part- or full-time employment, Sullivan said.

PCX specializes in precise machining of hard alloys including titanium and steel, and makes airframe assemblies and rotorcraft components for airplanes and helicopters.

Sullivan said the company will be hiring about 20 workers in Newington to fill manufacturing positions like CNC machinists and inspectors for repair and assembly. It will hire another dozen employees for positions that include technical support engineers, CNC programmers and operations support supervisors.

"We'll do what we need to do in order to get folks on board," said Sullivan.

Wooing talent these days requires manufacturers to offer a competitive salary and benefits, a comfortable work environment and commitment to the surrounding community. PCX recently renovated its engineering offices and has employee-engagement programs that include a summer golf league and charity events, Hartman said.

But by far the most important ingredient to success is training, preferably paid, on-the-job training that leads to a hire, Frisby and Sullivan said.

For example, Al Sturdevant, PCX's director of engineering, was originally an intern. And recently, PCX hired intern Saban Becirovic, 21, of Hartford as a CNC programmer.

Becirovic, who is pursuing a mechanical engineering degree with a focus on aerospace at Central Connecticut State University, is working full time for PCX and attending school part time after participating in a paid internship in March 2016. He will graduate in 2019, but plans to stay with the company, he said.

Becirovic helps create programs that are used to design parts.

"No day is exactly the same," Becirovic said. "It's always different. The parts are always different; the geometry is always different; and I really feel like I learn something new every day."

Hartman said it was critical to lock Becirovic in as an employee as early as possible. CNC programming is a skill that is in high demand and it requires an aptitude for coding, math and problem solving, Hartman said.

Investing in CT

PCX is owned by two private equity firms — New Canaan-based RFE Investment Partners and 24/6 Capital Partners of Massachusetts — which bought the company from Charlotte-based SPX Corp. in 2014 for \$62 million.

Frisby and Sullivan said the manufacturer has spent about \$12 million over the past three years on state-of-the-art equipment, and recently invested \$2 million in an oversized mill turn, which most companies PCX's size don't have.

A mill turn is a large lathe with five-axis milling capability, making it easier to cut or shape complex parts. Its shaft is used with helicopter rotor systems, connecting the blades and the main gear case — essentially turning and milling at the same time while

the part is being held in place. Precision is key to this type of manufacturing, Hartman and Sullivan said.

The mill turn has been a selling point with customers, and helped PCX land contracts with Bell Helicopter of Fort Worth, Texas, Hartman said.

"It opened up the opportunity for us to bid on jobs we may not normally have been invited to bid on," he said.

Frisby said the company has 12.9 acres in Newington and the capacity to expand, though there are no immediate plans to do so.

As for whether PCX will stay in Connecticut as major employers like Aetna and Alexion relocate headquarters elsewhere, Frisby's answer, without equivocation, is "Yes."

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