

Wentworth turns Polish plant into hub for blow molds

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PONIATOWA, POLAND (Jan. 21, 10:55 a.m. EST) -- Money isn't everything.

For Canadian mold maker and molder Wentworth Technologies Co. Ltd., technology is giving the firm a new way to compete for workers beyond a basic paycheck as well as turning its Polish operations into world-class productions, capable of matching its counterparts anywhere.

"Wentworth is one of the biggest technology companies in Poland now and in this area," said Robert Niedziółka, PET sales manager at Wentworth's Poniatowa plant. "This is very important for young people. They have a real opportunity here."

Engineers can advance at Wentworth in ways they cannot elsewhere, even outside of Poland, a big lure for drawing and keeping talent, he said. And it helps the company continue to improve production.

"People know that they can advance in the company here," Niedziółka said. "I started as a designer, and now I'm a sales manager. Some of the engineers started on the shop floor."

Those opportunities were not necessarily easy to see when Burlington, Ontario-based Wentworth first came to Poland.

Founder Walter Kuskowski — who immigrated to Canada from Poland in the 1960s — moved his international company into Poland in 1997 and since then has created a major foothold in central Europe, to complement operations in North America, Western Europe and Asia.

During a Sept. 21 interview in Poniatowa, Niedziółka joked that no one was quite sure how Kuskowski discovered Wentworth's new home in Poland, but he got a good tip.

"Like so many things, we came there by accident," Kuskowski said.

Wentworth was encouraged to consider locating in central and Eastern Europe by its international customers that were moving into the area. Poland had the largest economy in the region, and Kuskowski knew both the language and the culture.

Speaking to one person about potential business sites there led him to another person, then another, and eventually he found Poniatowa — a town with fewer than 15,000 residents in southeast Poland, near Lublin. There are no major roads leading into the city, no rail lines and no airport.

In 1997, the city had just lost 6,000 jobs when a state-owned washing machine manufacturer went out of business.

But from the shell of that company, Wentworth purchased the former tooling operation and hired its former employees. About 80 percent of the Polish firm's tools were for metal parts, the remaining 20 percent in injection molding. Plus, the equipment was old — with only one computer numerically controlled machine in the building. But they already knew the basics.

“It was a change of life for them, a change of an approach in how to do business,” said Tomasz Schabowski, operations manager of the mold-making division.

“The shapes they made previously weren’t the same level of complexity. The tools weren’t very complicated, but one of the most important parts was that they had very good people. They had engineers with actual experience, some of them with more than 25 years.

“They built on the base that was already there.”

At Poniatowa, Wentworth combined that experience with training from its home base in Burlington, to turn the plant into a global producer.

“In the last two years, we have become the main supplier of blow molds for the whole [Wentworth] group,” Schabowski said.

“We are international, completely. Our customers are in Canada, in the United States, in Germany, in Italy.”

Wentworth has repeated its success in Poniatowa throughout Poland.

The company has injection mold making and molding in Bydgoszcz, contract plastics processing in Krokowa, and thermoforming in Zarnowiec.

Because of its success in Zarnowiec, Wentworth is looking for an acquisition to boost its packaging capabilities.

Wentworth’s Rzeszów facility is now its hub for blow mold tooling components. The site works closely with sister company Electra Form Industries in Vandalia, Ohio, and is boosting PET blow mold production for customers further east in the Ukraine and Russia.

Meanwhile, Wentworth is building its ability to find and retain skilled employees, and Schabowski hopes that will help combat a trend of young people leaving the country.

Poland has lost many of its young people to jobs in Western Europe, especially England and Ireland. Emigration has been so strong that there is a Polish-language Catholic church in Dublin. Even small airports, like the one in Rzeszów, offer direct-flight travel to those countries.

The jobs Wentworth has created in Poland, more than 300, add a philosophical aspect to the firm’s expansion by helping to stabilize small towns and local economies, Kuskowski said.

“We think we’ve reached the tipping point,” he said.

“Ten, five, even three years ago, the trend was for young people to leave, but now, we’re not seeing it as much,” Kuskowski said.