SEPCO
Automating Success

Can cool robots and machines drive up sales and profits? At South Erie Production Company (SEPCO), President and Owner, Dan Ignasiak, thinks so!

Ignasiak knew someday SEPCO would have a robot operating one of their machines, not only because of the coolness factor, but because of the efficiencies it would afford the company. In order to keep SEPCO financially healthy, SEPCO needed to increase plant capacity to accommodate bringing in new business.

According to Chris Pederson, Operations Manager and Mechanical Engineer, the challenge was identifying which process would benefit the most. He said, "We ended up taking the dirtiest job in the shop and making it the coolest." Ignasiak adds, "This kind of technology will attract more young people into manufacturing. And if the company didn't keep up with technology, I figure we'd be out of business in less than 10 years due to the advancing nature of the industry."

SEPCO, located in Summit Township, Erie PA, is a manufacturer specializing in fabricated metals including tube cutting, end finishing, and banjo fittings. They produce millions of parts annually, turning commodity metal stock into value-added and often complex parts that supply engine manufacturers. The company was founded in 1966 by Leo Ignasiak, who had the vision of starting the company after being fired from his manufacturing job at the age of 50. It's this vision that his son Dan and the employees carry out today, with the mantra that SEPCO is all about "great people running really cool machines." The robotic arm, named Rosie after the Jetsons' household robot, was installed on May 12, 2015 with the systems integration expertise of NuTec Tooling Systems fromMeadville, PA and a grant provided by the Northwest Industrial Resource Center (NWIRC). After only two days post-installation, Ignasiak said, "It was exciting to actually see her run and have an immediate impact.

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Chris Pedersen, SEPCO Operations Manager and Mechanical Engineer, with Rosie and NuTec Tooling Systems programmer, TJ Proper.

Without any tweaking yet, we're already producing more pieces per hour and are confident we'll hit our 40% increase in throughput goal." Ed Barthelmes, NWIRC Strategic Business Advisor, noted "The NWIRC is proud to provide grant assistance and support Dan on this high-impact project for SEPCO."

So now that Rosie is hard at work, what happens to Charlie, a 29-year veteran machinist of SEPCO who operates the machine? Charlie now works side by side with Rosie to focus on process and logistics assurance, product quality, and new process design. "I'm excited, but a little nervous at the same time because it's a new process to our operation," he said. "I see the upside of working with robotics as I no longer have to deal with repetition, removing parts with burrs or sharp edges from our tooling, and the random lubrication mess that can result when working so close to our machine."

SEPCO's website shows a timeline of milestones for the company. Their last milestone reads, "I want our first robot!"

As it turns out, that day is now here!

"We ended up taking the dirtiest job in the shop and making it the coolest," Pedersen said.

Cover Photos

Top Right: Rosie, the new robotic arm at SEPCO

Center: Dan Ignasiak, SEPCO Owner/President with Ed Barthelmes, NWIRC Strategic Business Advisor