

JOPLIN REGIONAL BUSINESS JOURNAL

www.jrbj.biz Reprinted from the September 15, 2014 issue



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ABOVE: A welder at Able Manufacturing and Assembly LLC builds a metal cab on the company's assembly line in early September. Able applied for and received a \$1.2 million economic development loan from the city of Joplin, and in turn it has hired more than 50 people and has grown its sales by 20 percent, according to President Steve Courtade. Courtade and his team talk with JRBJ about the company, its future and how it's going to get there. **BELOW:** A fiberglass technician begins the process of making an auto body part by spraying fiberglass into a mold.

Able sees growth in wake of economic development loan

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Able Manufacturing & Assembly LLC is seeing big dividends following a \$1.2 million economic development loan from the city of Joplin, according to President Steve Courtade.

"We're on a fairly phenomenal growth path right now based on where we thought we were going to be," Courtade said. "We're up by 20 percent, and the projections look really strong."

The company has hired about 55 new employees since the city granted the loan in March. At the time Able officials said the company would invest a total of \$2.5 million into infrastructure and equipment upgrades at its two Joplin facilities.

Courtade said the company has committed about half of the initial \$1.2 million. Improvements include a new roof on the company's Seventh Street facility, as well as the purchase of six EnviroSystem dust collectors.

"From an employee standpoint and a business standpoint, it creates a better environment for our employees," said Vice President of Metals Operations Peter Chapman.

On a tour of the facility, Chapman pointed to dust that had collected on fixtures and products in the company's sanding area, where large fiberglass components are smoothed. In some places, the dust had settled in quarter-inch deep layers.

"That's from two days," he said.

While the new air systems will create a cleaner environment for employees – increasing productivity, according to Courtade – the reduction of dust throughout the facility will increase business, said Vice President of Composites Operations Paul Wybo.

"Case New Holland, one of our larger customers, are sensitive about the amount of dust in the facility," he said. "As we bond and assemble products, that dust can settle on them. As we collect that dust and it doesn't spread out through the facility, we predict it will open up more opportunities with them."

The company – which manufactures fiberglass and metal cabs for trucks, cranes and other heavy equipment – is working on growing its business both organically and through new customers, according to Courtade.

Organic growth is fairly simple and straightforward, Courtade said. New business growth, on the other hand, requires investment and patience, he said.

"One of the challenges we have as a company is new business has a very long lead time," he said. "The lead time – from the customer first talking to us to actually producing a product for them – is anywhere from a year to a year and a half."

That kind of new business is exactly what the company wants, however, because it can lead to big returns. While the



company is currently at work designing six cab prototypes for a new customer, that effort could lead to a contracted order of 15-20 units per month. When new products come online, that means new employees as well, Courtade said.

"We have to design the product, build the prototype and send it out," he said. "If they like it and they pick it up, then we have to hire the staff and train the staff to build the new products."

Although Courtade declined to disclose company revenues, he said the basic rule of thumb the company uses is for every \$1 million in revenue they require an additional 12 to 15 employees.

Able currently employs 315.

Chapman said the company is looking for another 15 employees currently to hit capacity. He said the problem, though, is finding qualified candidates.

"We're continuing to look for new employees as we grow and refine our processes, but it's sometimes difficult to acquire the talent that we need," he said, pointing to candidates with experience in auto body work, painting, welding and fiberglass.

"We hire frequently from Crowder College and Franklin Tech, and we need those employees with those skills. We rely on having that workforce."