

Empower Employees for Long-Term Business Success

Work hard and stay humble—the sign on my office wall pretty much captures the spirit of Tool Gauge. Founded in 1966 by an Austrian immigrant who worked in Australia as a General Motors machinist, the company began building injection molding tools and established an injection molding facility. In the mid-1980s, it began supplying parts to Boeing and became BAC5231-approved. Forward 50 years and the company has been the proud recipient of Boeing's *Silver Performance Excellence Award* for seven consecutive years and is one of only a handful of Boeing-certified class 1 and class 2 plastics shops in the world capable of machining full five-axis parts for global aerospace OEMs and tier-one aircraft interior integrators.

Despite being one of Washington state's best-kept secrets for so many years, Tool Gauge has always been known for its leading-edge manufacturing and engineering teams in aerospace circles. After working in shop floor operations management for the past 15 years, I have experienced "team power" first-hand. As the company's newly minted CEO since October 2016, it is my responsibility to ensure that we continue to leverage our extensive talent pool to tackle the challenges that come with growing pains, whether cost control, technical innovation, global competition, customer satisfaction, product quality, or on-time delivery to name just a few.

People are a business' most valuable asset and like any valuable asset, they need to be cared for. In that respect, I find that being a female CEO, although a bit unconventional for an aerospace company, I'll admit, does help when it comes to coaching and communication. It has been proven time and time again that happy employees make



for happy customers, so I strive to constantly empower our employees and managers to come up with new ideas, give them room to grow and the latitude to make decisions in a safe environment. If new ideas don't work, we try something different or simply go back to the way it was, all with the objective of getting the company to innovate and move forward as a team.

Today the results of this employee-centric philosophy speak for themselves. Last year, the team successfully deployed a complex ERP system without missing a single shipping deadline, which is no small feat knowing we ship hundreds of thousands of metal and plastic assemblies every year all over the world.

As a team, we have taken big steps toward becoming a top performing global supplier of aerospace parts and assemblies in a competitive, fragmented global market. The pressure to reduce supply chain costs has compelled us to focus our efforts on adding value through technological innovation. We've worked hard to identify those areas where we could make an investment, solve a problem, and offer more value to our aerospace partners. With the latest engineering solutions, we design and produce accurate structural parts faster and at lower, more competitive costs for our customers.



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Our philosophy doesn't stop at cultivating existing talent, but also extends to hiring. At Tool Gauge, we are extremely fortunate to work hand in hand with local colleges, including the Aerospace Joint Apprenticeship Committee (AJAC), Bates Technical College, Clover Park Technical College, and Renton Technical College, to develop the next-generation of engineering interns, qualified CNC machinists, journeymen mold makers, and machine programmers.

What does the future hold for Tool Gauge? In April, we kicked off an extensive international marketing communications campaign to put our name on the global map, starting with announcing a \$5 million investment into a major expansion of our Tacoma manufacturing facility. This infusion of capital will double our factory floor, create up to 100 new jobs in the region over the next five years, and allow us to expand our plastics press range, broaden our secondary operations, and install a state-of-the-art vertical paint system leading to shorter lead times, enhanced quality, and better cost control. 



Debbie Lee is an AFA board member and serves as CEO of Tool Gauge, a Tacoma-based manufacturer of complex, high-value plastic and metal assemblies for global aerospace OEMs and tier-one aircraft interior integrators.



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