

Plastics News

Attacking the skilled-worker gap

By: **Brennan Lafferty**

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Zeeland, Mich. — Drive down Production Court and the sign for Primera Plastics Inc. comes quickly into view. So, too, does the message below the sign: “Now hiring.”

Owner Noël Cuellar, 56, makes it clear from the start of a conversation that the injection molder has made finding workers and developing them job one at Primera.

“We are hiring for maintenance, engineering, labor,” said Cuellar, who started Primera in 1994 and is the sole owner after buying out his second business partner a couple years ago.

Cuellar plans for the long-term when it comes to filling the skilled-worker

gap that is prevalent throughout the manufacturing sector. He launched Primera Pathways two years ago. The result is 10 high school students

Primera Pathways two years ago. The result is 10 high school students arrive after school four days a week, putting in three hours a day doing light assembly at the business that generates 75 percent of its \$23 million in sales from the automotive sector. Cuellar wants to provide life skills to his young employees, too. He regularly hosts PNC Bank employees to educate Primera workers in budgeting and finance. He goes one step further with a plan to match up to \$2,500 that his student workers save for college.

**JUST THE FACTS:
PRIMERA PLASTICS INC.**



YEAR ESTABLISHED:

1994

ANNUAL SALES:

**\$23
MILLION**

NUMBER OF
INJECTION MOLDING
MACHINES:

30

MAIN MARKETS:

**Automotive, office furniture,
consumer goods and medical**



MAJOR
CUSTOMERS:

**Gentex,
Herman
Miller**

Lest anyone think that Cuellar is simply extending a hand to kids, he tells the story of a male high school student who asked to work in the Primera Pathways program. The student, however, did not take his drug test by the deadline, so Cuellar would not accept the student into the program, at least for now.

"We are not a charity. We are for profit," he said, but quickly adds that the student can reapply later.

Cuellar is proud that his 136-employee operation in western Michigan has nine master molders. "That's unheard of for a company our size," he said.

He also is investing more than \$3 million into the company. For starters, Primera has begun installing a new \$500,000 cooling system that employees will enjoy this summer and will allow him to expand into the medical field. In addition, the company is purchasing six new Arburg presses for \$2.5 million. Cuellar plans to move older presses to a new technical center where young apprentices and current staff will get hands-on experience.

"I tell the kids: Anyone can press buttons on this machine. I need you to learn how to fix this machine," he said.

Cuellar has learned a few lessons since the Great Recession when sales fell to \$8 million. He's spent the last three years paying down debt and manages growth at no more than 10 percent per year. "Not all business is good business," he said.

In that vein, he has no plans to expand manufacturing outside of Michigan, especially to Mexico where he's visited three times and come away with the same impression.

"Tier 2s and Tier 3s can't be successful there," Cuellar said.

There are several aspects of his job that keeps Cuellar up at night — finding skilled workers, pleasing his customers, his family, including his 17-year-old son. But his top business concern is his people.

"There are 136 individuals that work here. What keeps me up at night is what if I make the wrong decision for growth. Let's say I go after that \$2 million program because I'm going after volume. So I'm gambling on 136 peoples' lives. So that's what keeps me up at night. I want to make sure I'm doing it right. I've never met any successful person who did it by himself. I'm a Hispanic male. We're more of a touchy, feely kind of group," he said.

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