

SAS maintains edge in tough environment



Dale Dillhoff, a service and assembly technician at SAS Automation, adjusts a robotic end of arm tool that is designed to grab bags. SAS Automation is a local producer of robotics technology located in Xenia. Staff photo by Lisa Powell

Overseas expansion, healthy backlog keep Xenia company going

By Thomas Gnau
Staff Writer

XENIA — Visit Trent Fisher's office at SAS Automation, and you may notice the sign by his door: "Risk-bearer/owner."

Feel free to chuckle. But for this engineer and business owner, the job titles are no joke.

SAS specializes in robotic end-of-arm tooling. The company doesn't make the "arm" some robotic machines have but what one might be tempted to call the "hand" of the robotic arm — the part that clenches, grasps, pulls or plucks, moving an object from one point to another. Customers can order the finished end-of-arm tooling from SAS or a "kit" to assemble the tool themselves.

SAS has remained in the black in this recession, even though Fisher said he hasn't let go of as many workers or cut research and development as deeply as he might have. He knows the recession won't last forever.

"We can't look at it short-term," he said.

It was that tendency to take

SAS Automation

Founded: 1996

Ownership: Private

Based: 1200 S. Patton St., Xenia

Local employees: 19; **employees in Germany:** Five

Revenue: Wouldn't give exact figures. Net income dropped by at least a third from 2008 to 2009, but the company remains profitable.

Local customers: Motoman, All Service Plastics, Delphi

Source: Trent Fisher, SAS Automation president

the long view that inspired Fisher to open a sales branch in Germany in 2001, when the company was only five years old. In Europe, hiring and keeping workers is more expensive than in the United States, so he understood that some shops there will want robotic technology.

Said Fisher, "I knew for long-term growth, it was important to go outside the states."

The move resulted in an Ohio exporting award in 2004, but more importantly, it opened new markets. Today, SAS sees 20 to

25 percent of its sales in Europe, another 10 to 15 percent in the rest of the world outside the U.S., and the remainder in the U.S. itself. He hopes to open a sales office in China "within the next few years."

Steve Brodsky, executive director of the Xenia Economic Growth Corp., credits Fisher with being "very nimble" in his business model.

Brodsky points to SAS as what he calls an example of "the proper use" of business incentives — a boost to an already sound busi-

ness. The corporation, also called XEGC, has helped SAS with low-interest loans and other tools.

"SAS is certainly a success story, not just for Xenia, but for all of Ohio," Brodsky said. "Trent is a very astute businessman. He has adapted his business to a changing environment."

So far, so good, at least early in 2010. Fisher reports that his company's backlog — the number of orders waiting to be filled — has jumped at least 20 percent year-to-date compared to the same point in 2009.

Part of the SAS story is a "dashboard" — elaborate mounted charts, graphs and models — on a wall in an employee break room that outlines precise company goals, including the firm's 2010 first quarter sales target, a proprietary figure. Fisher says he also opens his company's books to his workers, so they understand where the business has gone and where it is going.

"I just don't like my employees to be in the dark," he said.

Contact this reporter at (937) 225-2390 or tgnau@DaytonDailyNews.com.