

Business Spotlight

Stratasys



It's hard to beat the "wow" factor at Stratasys, Inc. The company designs and sells 3D printers and production systems that produce plastic objects for prototyping, testing or using as real parts. Product samples displayed throughout Stratasys headquarters in Eden Prairie include miniature airplanes, adjustable wrenches and oversized, hollow golf balls. Touring the facility can feel a little like peeking inside Santa's workshop.

The items are not toys, though — they are prototypes or real parts that showcase the capabilities of Stratasys' high-tech equipment. Most employees have a favorite item they show visitors. Larry Doerrs, vice president of operations at Stratasys, has a collection of product samples.

So does Carol Scheel, the Lifeworks job coach who supervises eight Lifeworks clients employed at Stratasys. "We call them our treasures," says Scheel of the dozen or so items gathered at her workstation.

Hearing this makes Doerrs smile.

"Lifeworks is truly part of the culture here," he says. "They're making an important contribution to that culture and are excited about what we do."

Stratasys first partnered with Lifeworks in 2006, bringing in a handful of clients to meet a variety of temporary needs. In January 2009, the company decided to create a more permanent placement and hired a team of eight Lifeworks clients to repurpose its print cartridges and plastics.

"This is something we'd wanted to do for a long time, but we never seemed to be able to find the time or resources for it," says Doerrs. "Lifeworks was a perfect solution."

That solution has resulted in a tremendous reduction in waste. Previously, Stratasys filled a 30-yard dumpster with trash each week. Since Lifeworks began processing the cartridges and plastics, the company has reduced that to once every other month.

This fits well with the company's efforts to reduce, reuse, and recycle. Stratasys has a program that allows customers to return used material spools, canisters, and cartridges to Stratasys postage-free rather than disposing of them. Lifeworks employees disassemble these containers into components, and sort them for inspection and reuse or retirement.

Stratasys' equipment and its manufacturing process have several "green" credentials. Among them are energy saving and waste

reduction traits. The machines consume much less energy than traditional subtractive manufacturing methods, and they use only the material needed to build the part; there is virtually no waste. Additionally, there are no dangerous chemicals, gases, or byproducts to dispose of.

Preparing the material for repurposing requires sorting 14 different types of plastic and carefully disassembling print cartridges. The work demands focus and attention to detail — abilities the Lifeworks team has proven to have in spades.

"Our Lifeworks staff perform at outstanding levels," says Doerrs. "The results speak for themselves."

Doerrs, whose sister-in-law has a disability, is an enthusiastic advocate for bringing people with disabilities into the workforce.

"People with disabilities have a lot to contribute, and it's rewarding to be able to facilitate those contributions," says Doerrs. "I strongly encourage everyone to look around their workplace for jobs that could be filled by people with disabilities."

