

INVESTING IN TRAINING AND INNOVATION

CenterLine develops many of its employees through high-school co-op and apprenticeship programs—the investment pays off in a highly skilled, creative team

PROFILE Michael Beneteau, CEO, CenterLine (Windsor) Limited



AT A GLANCE

SECTOR: WELDING MANUFACTURING COMPONENTS AND SYSTEMS, FROM TIPS TO FULL AUTOMATION LINES

IN BUSINESS SINCE	1959
ANNUAL SALES (2015)	\$160 million
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES	556
THREE-YEAR EMPLOYEE RETENTION RATE	90%
THREE-YEAR COMPANY GROWTH RATE	2%

Even in a city that has been a manufacturing hub for more than a century, CenterLine (Windsor) Limited stands out. At first glance, its largest Windsor plant, at 230,000 square feet, looks much like any other large assembly floor as workers busily operate high-tech machinery in small groups called “cells.”

If you look a little closer, you may notice that there are no fixed machines or assembly lines. CenterLine is the ultimate custom manufacturer, producing specialty welding systems and other industrial equipment to meet the needs of automotive, mass-transit and aerospace manufacturers around the world.

If you come back in a few weeks, most of the production cells you saw before will have been replaced with colourful new configurations for the next project. Flexibility is the key at all CenterLine plants, including its locations in Mexico, Germany, Romania, Brazil, India and China. “The value of the company is by far in the people,” says CEO Michael Beneteau. “Since we’re project-based, our volumes can vary as much as 50%, so when the sun shines, we have to hunker down and get it right the first time.”

This commitment to flexibility and innovation makes CenterLine a picky employer. Beneteau needs more than general labourers who can work the same assembly line every day. CenterLine requires highly skilled, creative and motivated employees to work closely with customers to design new processes and tools, build temporary manufacturing configurations, fix any problems that crop up and complete production on time so another production cell can be set up.

CenterLine’s philosophy is “Get ‘em young and train ‘em.” It hires for attitude and provides skills training and cross-training that turns young workers—some still in high school—into problem-solving CenterLine lifers. Most new employees start on the plant floor to learn the culture and processes. Then the company helps employees find their passions, whether it is die-making, electrical, engineering or design.

With the unemployment rate hovering around 10% in Windsor, the highest among Canadian cities, you might think employers would catch a break. But no, says Beneteau. “It’s a tough, tough market. I can’t even hire a sweeper.” In 2015, the company

created 100 new jobs, filling them through such traditional channels as employee referrals, newspaper ads, open houses and trade fairs.

To maintain its innovation pace, however, CenterLine is counting on a ramped-up apprenticeship program operated with local high schools, St. Clair College and the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program. The company has co-op education programs for promising Grade 11 students, who can work for a year while earning high-school credits and a full wage. The best workers are offered full-time jobs, and a select few enter the four-year apprenticeship program. Accepting five to 10 new apprentices a year, CenterLine now has 50 in its pipeline, the largest apprenticeship program in Windsor. “They don’t need a machinery background,” says Human Resources Manager Bill Wigle, “just a desire to learn a trade—and the right attitude. We want the go-getters.”

Putting such emphasis on apprenticeships brings CenterLine full circle. Beneteau’s father, Donald Beneteau, was an apprentice at a local auto-parts plant when his supervisor, Fred Wigle (Bill’s father), recognized his

potential as a craftsman and innovator. The two men later started their own tool-and-die business, producing seat-belt buckles. CenterLine grew for the best reason possible: customers, including the Big Three automakers, kept asking Donald to solve their technical problems. After repairing many malfunctioning welding machines, CenterLine started building its own welding systems, a specialty that still generates two-thirds of its sales.

Wigle calls Beneteau’s father “a bit of a genius.” Copies of his patent certificates line the corridors at CenterLine’s main Windsor plant. The company’s recently inaugurated \$7-million state-of-the-art training centre is called the Donald Beneteau Centre of Excellence.

To this day, CenterLine specializes in turning out innovators. “Our culture is that we try to empower people to develop skills,” says Wigle. “Our employees don’t have only a single trade, they are multi-talented. They do electrical, welding, plumbing, programming. That makes life more interesting. They can pretty well take care of any problem they run into.” Other forms of training available include

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sales, technical skills (e.g., Excel and blueprint reading), safety certification and leadership.

Investing in people pays off for CenterLine. Its production employees often work at client sites, installing or maintaining new systems. Even designers creating new welding tools work alongside clients. “Customers are naming particular employees as the reason they want to work with our company,” says Beneteau. “They say things like, ‘If Richard is designing this system, I don’t have to worry about it.’”

In recent years, CenterLine adopted a new strategy to support this approach. “We want to be viewed as a desirable place to work,” says Beneteau. “Our philosophy is to keep the employees happy.” To that end, the company offers a pension plan, discloses financial results through quarterly meetings and sponsors regular social events. It also offers a generous profit-sharing system. “It’s the culture of our two founders,” says Beneteau. “A quarter of the profits goes to the employees. The rest goes back into the company for new machines and new buildings.”

Employees from all disciplines and levels take part in annual meetings to set the three-year strategic plan. “We need their input,” says Beneteau. “To plan, you need to know what opportunities are out there and they tend to come from your customers.” On top of that, he notes, “if you’re expecting employees to implement a plan, it is a lot easier if they have a hand in creating it.”



CenterLine CEO Michael Beneteau (left) believes in the value of investing in employees for long-term success