

Profile

Robert Bechtold: Molding a new future through innovation

By KATHY QUINN THOMAS

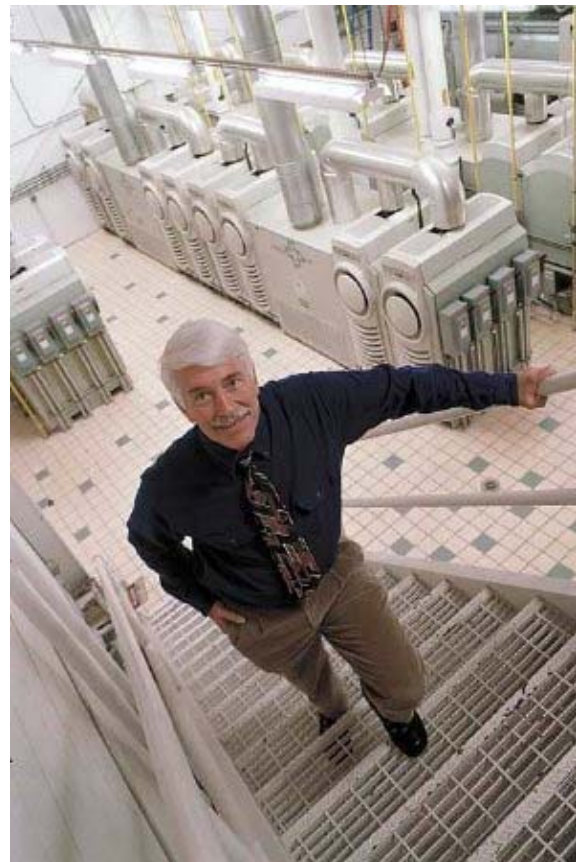
Still waters run deep, the old adage says. Robert Bechtold, 54, the founder and president of Harbec Plastics Inc., proves the folk wisdom true. "Quiet?" says Nabil Nasr, director of the Center for Integrated Manufacturing Studies and assistant provost of academic affairs at Rochester Institute of Technology. Nasr met Bechtold in the late 1980s. "I had known and worked with Bob for some time before he asked me one day if I would stop by and take a look at this company he knew about," Nasr recalls. When Nasr showed up at the company, he asked who owned it and then learned it was Bechtold. "I had no idea he owned a company," Nasr says.

The quiet man, however, has an inventor's mentality, Nasr says. Bechtold's passion for trying the new and tinkering with it has led to significant change-to his industry, career, company and the environment. Harbec-founded in 1977, with its first employee hired seven years later-today has 100 employees and logged \$10 million in revenues in 2001. Located in Ontario, Wayne County, the company is a precision custom molder, moldmaker and model shop. Harbec has a niche: It specializes in high-end and exotic materials, thick-walled precision parts and insert molding. Bechtold is the "bec" in Harbec. The "har" is a bad memory he declines to discuss. "Not long ago, my nephew told me what he thought Harbec meant Hardworking Bechtolds," he says. "I liked it so much that now that's what I tell anyone who asks."

No one could accuse Bechtold of not working intensely and at a furious pace. After graduating from Bishop Kearney High School in 1966, Bechtold fulfilled his military duty serving with a U.S. Army helicopter crew in Korea. "We patrolled the (demilitarized zone) in Korea, but in the Vietnam era, that was not a bad job," he says. Returning to Rochester after his tour of duty was over, Bechtold apprenticed as a toolmaker. After working for Delco Products Division for several years, and earning the journeyman title, Bechtold left the company. He did tool-and-die projects in his barn in Webster on nights and weekends while working with deaf students who were studying manufacturing at RIT.

He eventually became a faculty member, and earned a bachelor of fine arts degree from RIT in 1981. A master's degree in technology followed two years later. The barn shop was fulfilling but impractical, Bechtold says. "It was just me and that's all I really wanted," he says. "But I also had a family and the cyclical nature of a one-man tool shop is unbearable. It would be just horrible feast and famine."

While applying to the Small Business Administration for loans, Bechtold met William Feldman, a retired Eastman Kodak Co. executive who volunteered with the SBA's Service Corps of Retired Executives program to counsel fledgling businesses. Bechtold credits Feldman for Harbec's eventual growth. "I knew tools, but I didn't know business," he said. "With Bill's help, I learned the right way to grow the business." In 1984,



Bechtold added his first full-time employee, his brother, Joseph. He manages Harbec's model shop. When Harbec moved to a 19,000-square-foot facility in Ontario in 1987, it reached some 25 staffers and became a regional shop. "Our competition then was whatever shops were in Upstate New York," Bechtold says. Bechtold has a passion for finding methods to enable his company to do things better and faster. Rather than continue as a regional shop, he began tinkering with new technological approaches.

Technology focused

Harbec rapidly transformed from the one-man shop in a barn into a national player in the industry. Bechtold's inventor's mentality led to advances in the field. The company embraced any technology that could offer more precision and performance. Harbec tackled computer-aided design, computer-aided manufacturing and computer numerically controlled equipment as soon as the technologies were available. Bechtold also converted much of the Harbec's equipment from traditional motors to electric several years ago, an unusual move in the industry. Electricity gives the machines more power, eliminates noise and prevents the mess of oil spills, he says.

In addition, Bechtold is sold on Internet technology and Harbec has developed several uses for it, including a virtual conference room. The Web program allows the engineers to connect with clients more often. It creates more accurate design work and helps reduce turnaround time by 50 percent, he says. While using the advanced technical tools, Harbec engineers developed proprietary processes that make the company attractive to customers who need custom work. For example, Harbec is one of only five companies worldwide that can "grow" aluminum models, Bechtold says. Many companies use sand casting to create an aluminum mold. For some products, though, such as Harbec client Borg-Warner Inc.'s tensioner arm, the cast aluminum was not strong enough to withstand the rigors of product testing. Borg-Warner engineers asked for help, Bechtold says.

Harbec employees developed a method of carving the aluminum so the walls of the mold for the Borg-Warner part were thicker and able to withstand pressure. "I keep telling our guys, we exist to make those engineers look good," Bechtold says. "If we bail them out of a tough spot, they'll come back and send their friends. "We keep earning the opportunity to get the contracts that customers can't get cheaper somewhere else-because nobody else is doing it." Adds RIT's Nasr: "Bob has a real passion for advancing the science in engineering."

A global business

Harbec clients now are large national companies such as Borg-Warner and Dow Chemical Co. "We compete for their work with companies all around the world-China, South America and the Eastern bloc European countries," Bechtold says. "We are all figuratively or literally standing in the same lobbies looking for the same opportunities." Global competition means Harbec must constantly look for an edge in the bidding process, Bechtold says. "I can't compete with those countries with labor and cost of materials," he says. "On all of those things, they have an edge. But technology, so far, has been enough to give us something that they don't have." The availability of human resources, however, concerns Bechtold. High schools are not directing students into the trades. Each year fewer people apprentice as toolmakers, he says. "If I could, I would go into every school and talk about what a wonderful way to make a living this is," he says. "It's creative and it pays well."

Robert Steinorth, a longtime friend and current director of human resources at Harbec, says Bechtold has an ability to look at situations from a variety of perspectives.

"Bob is a good researcher, a good collector of information. And he has two unique sides-the toolmaker and the artist," Steinorth says. "When he makes a decision, or sees a problem, he sees it from angles that others don't. He sees unique solutions to situations."

Looking for new directions for the company is what he enjoys best, Bechtold says. He has grown a management team that takes care of the day-to-day business. That frees him to focus on research.

Bechtold also has a strong moral center, Steinorth says. When combined with his passion for technology and change, it has taken Harbec into some pioneering territory. "Bob feels very strongly about protecting the environment because it is the right thing," he says. "The whole cogenerating thing came out of that." Harbec's \$2 million cogeneration expansion project took eight years to research and develop, Bechtold says. The bulk of the project was finished in summer 2001. It resulted in a Harbec facility twice as big as the original plant and it no longer uses Rochester Gas and Electric Corp. for power. Instead, Harbec operates its own power plant. Using 20 30-kilowatt gas-powered generators, Harbec creates electricity to run all the equipment in the building. The heat from the generators creates the hot water used in the building's radiant heating system. In summer, the hot water is used to run a chiller that cools the plant.

The addition uses skylights so the need for indoor lighting is reduced. This summer, the company will erect a windmill to generate electricity and reduce the need for gas for the generators, Bechtold says. The cost will be recovered in roughly eight years by the savings in monthly electricity bills. The heating and air conditioning are free by-products, he says. Harbec previously paid RG&E roughly \$20,000 a month in electricity costs, he says. Now, it pays roughly \$15,000. "Why did I do it? Not only can I pay for the equipment in eight to 10 years, but I'm also heating and air conditioning the whole plant free. Why not? I have gained something for this company that gives it another unique advantage," he says. "I have cheaper power than any of my competitors or at least as cheap as my competitors in Fairport, and even better if you add in that I can heat and cool the whole plant."

A green guy

Concern for the environment is what drove Bechtold to the project, Steinorth says. But Bechtold prefers to keep that quiet. "I never lead with the environment when I talk to other businesses," he says. "I've learned as a businessman that it's not a good way to start talking about the subject. So I say I did it because of efficiency, and that's true." Once the windmill goes up, the Harbec plant will have a Web site, sponsored by the New York State Energy Research and Development Association. The site will let visitors see how much the project is saving how it compares to what the utility charge would be and how long it is taking to pay off the cost of the plant. The Web site also will offer links with information on how to complete a similar project.

"That was one of the reasons it took us so long. There was no clear path to information. "It took untold numbers of hours to ferret through everything and try to come up with what kind of system would work," Bechtold says. "Hopefully now that will be much easier for the next person who can tie into one site that will give him an intelligent and correct direction." Before Bechtold began making Harbec greener, he tested his eco-theories by "greening" his home. An old farmhouse in Webster, the building now provides 60 percent to 70 percent of its own energy, he says. The property is on its second windmill-the first one wore out-that provides the electricity that runs appliances and heats the house. It also uses a geothermal ground loop where heat is taken from the earth and electrically pumped through the house.

One of the biggest difficulties in both power projects was educating local zoning boards, Bechtold says. No one locally had done anything like it before, so officials knew little about cogeneration. In Ontario, Bechtold went to 13 consecutive monthly planning board meetings before the project was approved. Concerns included potential noise and possible damage to birds by a windmill. One issue was whether the windmill tower would create a distraction for drivers. "My company is in an industrial park, which if you noticed when you drove by, is full of towers," Bechtold says. "We went out and took a picture of the site and used the computer to superimpose an image of the windmill right where it was going to be. Then we made a big color photo for everyone at the board and sent it to them. "It was like looking at a Where's Waldo? puzzle," Bechtold says of the photo. "Which one of these towers is the one that's visually distracting? We finally wore them down."

Bechtold lives in his Webster farmhouse with his wife, Jean, and 12-year-old nephew Sean. The couple, married for 34 years, has four adult children: Tim, 30; Kate, 27; Amy, 25; and Heidi, 23. Jean has worked for Harbec since it began. She is the company's payroll officer and volunteers at Bethany House. "She has been such a moral champion," Bechtold says. "Without that strength behind you, it's pretty tough to make it. She is exceptionally understanding and in there swinging with me."

Collections and hobbies

When Bechtold needs to relax, he heads out to his hayfield and flies one of his two ultralights. The contraptions look like a go-cart with a parachute attached. By driving down a homemade runway in the hayfield, the chute opens up to the air and Bechtold flies.

"You don't go very far because it goes very slow," Bechtold says. "And you can only fly when it's mild and the wind is right." Bechtold traded in his half-interest in an airplane to buy his first ultralight. "I have always loved aviation since the Army," he says.

Family and business responsibilities had kept him from earning his pilot's license. Several years ago he bought the half-interest in the plane, and intended to try for a license again. But his crowded schedule and the Rochester weather made it difficult to schedule enough flying hours, he says. "Then I realized I don't really want to fly to get from point A to point B. I just want to get my feet off the ground," Bechtold says. He now flies 50 to 100 hours a year on his flying machines. Bechtold bought his second ultralight last summer. He is converting the first one from a gas engine to electric.

Alternative vehicles fascinate him, says his brother, Michael Bechtold, president of Optipro Systems Inc. in Ontario. Harbec company cars are either electric or hybrids.

Bechtold has a collection of other types of vehicles at home, his brother adds.

"The kids love visiting him. He's got all kinds of electrical bikes and scooters, a solar scooter, battery-operated cars," he says. "He has bicycles in all kinds of odd designs. He has at least enough for a museum."

Bechtold also collects holograms. They cover the walls in Harbec's public areas.

His brother's interest in aesthetics and fine art background are a natural extension of his tooling expertise, Michael Bechtold says. "The fine art thing was a natural path. It's not that he wanted to be a fine artist exactly; he wanted to understand it and how it applies to what he does."

The quiet inventor, however, does not like to acknowledge the depth of his expertise. "Look, I'm a toolmaker by trade," he says. "It's always the new technology side of the trade that's lured me along, from right out of high school until today and I'm sure from now and for the rest of my life."

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Close-up

Robert Bechtold

Title: President, Harbec Plastics Inc.

Age: 54

Education: Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, 1981; M.S. in Teaching, 1983, Rochester Institute of Technology ~ School of American Craftsmen.

Family: Wife, Jean; children Tim, 30, Kate, 27, Amy, 25, and Heidi, 23; and nephew Sean, 12

Quote: "I can't compete with those countries (China, Eastern Europe and South America) with labor and cost of materials. On all of those things, they have an edge. But technology, so far has been enough to give us something that they don't have."