

Hibbing Daily Tribune reporter writes about MDI

By Kelly Grinsteinner, Assistant Editor Hibbing Daily Tribune



MDI touts its work, and workforce

Photo by Kelly Grinsteinner-Ed Brandenburger, left, and Jim Svigel are the duo at the beginning of one of the assembly lines of U.S. Postal totes at Minnesota Diversified Industries, better known as MDI, here in Hibbing. The two spoke at an open house for the company last week about how much their jobs mean to them.

Company celebrates by holding an open house

**by Kelly Grinsteinner
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HIBBING — Ed Brandenburger has felt the ebbs and flows of the workload at Minnesota Diversified Industries, better know as MDI.

As an employee there for the past six years, he's gone through times of constant, heavy demand as well as has been laid off for various periods of time intermittently when there is no demand.

But he still praises the nonprofit company, and thanks them profusely for the chance to have a job.

"A job is more than just a pay check," he told the crowd during an open house held at the Hibbing plant last week. "Without work, I'd be sitting around, doing nothing and that's when I get into negative thinking. MDI has been good for me, and a good place to work."

MDI prides itself in providing quality plastics manufacturing, product fulfillment, packaging and assembly. Its mission is to encourage career development by helping disabled and disadvantaged workers grow.

MDI was founded in 1964 and expanded operations to Hibbing in 1992 and Grand Rapids in 1993.

The nonprofit has relied on federal contracts with the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) to produce plastic postal totes for the bulk of the company's sales — an arrangement that's worked for 35 consecutive years.

Employees of the MDI plant in Grand Rapids extrude the plastic for the postal totes, then ship the materials to the MDI plant in Hibbing, which manages assembly and shipment of the totes to nationwide USPS locations.

MDI provides progressive job opportunities for an under-served population of workers, of which 70 percent are disabled or have some kind of disadvantage.

The workforce at the local plant has fluctuated greatly through the years, based on the volume of the postal contract. The current contract, which was signed only weeks ago, is for 1.3 million totes. That's a significant dip from previous years of 2.4 million in 2008 and 4.5 million in 2007.

"Our largest year was eight million totes in one year," said Gary Flesland, manager of the Hibbing plant. "We put out about 75 pallets or about 6,000 totes a day right now, but our record is 45,000 totes in a day with five lines going here and one in Grand Rapids. That's pretty phenomenal. It didn't last for long, but it was fun."

The Hibbing plant currently employs about 39 people, including just more than 30 on the assembly floor. Work began only weeks ago, following a seven week shutdown that began on Sept. 18 as the company awaited official award of the postal contract.

Flesland said the current contract ensures enough work for the current volume of employees until next September.

Peter McDermott, president and CEO of MDI, commends those who make MDI the success it is.

"Like I told the employees, this workforce is the best workforce that I've ever worked with — they appreciate their job, get here on time or early, and do great work," he said. "These are people with great abilities, not just disabilities."

McDermott described the work setting as integrated, noting that roughly 50 percent have some type of disability.

"It's like working at a business in the community — working side by side those with who do have disabilities and those who don't," he said.

“... And for us, it’s a celebration when an employee from MDI gets a job elsewhere. That means a great opportunity for them and an opening for someone else. It’s a step forward for them.”

MDI was recently awarded \$600,000 in state general fund and stimulus dollars to develop a Placement Program — a new aim for the nonprofit.

They are currently working with the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development’s (DEED) Rehabilitation Services to design the program, said McDermott.

“We’ve traditionally only offered jobs within MDI, but now we’re looking to do more,” he added. “... We want to focus on placing people in jobs in competitive business enterprises at MDI or elsewhere.”

To help ease the ebbs and flows, McDermott said MDI is still looking to diversify and gain more customers. MDI has about 50 to 60 customers in addition to the postal service, but none as big.

“If we had two or three that size, that’d be great,” he said. “But it’s not reality.”

McDermott encourages any company in need of assembly, packaging, totes or other services, that MDI and its workforce could provide to contact them.

“We’d love to talk to them,” he said, noting the more demand for services the more people they can hire.

McDermott said he’d love to see the current number of employees double.

Jim Svigel, an MDI Hibbing employee, said he enjoys doing assembly working, adding that he likes “being productive and useful.”

“When I found out I was going to come here, I knew that the job would be easy, not strenuous,” he said. “I’m proud of myself and the services we provide. This is a good service, and I recommend anyone with a disability to work at MDI.”

Svigel also noted that he’s improved his skills over the years, as well as gained confidence.

Brandenberger said it’s challenging for persons to get a job right now, and even more difficult for persons with disabilities. There are also other limitations, such as reliance on public transportation.

He said the job keeps him busy, and he’s learned that the company will work with him if he’s “willing to meet them halfway.”

“Not all companies will make accommodations like that,” he added.

Brandenberger said the job is real positive in his life, adding that the income he receives goes toward house repairs.

“If I could give some advice to those looking for work, it’s this — give work you’re best shot,” he said.

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MDI is located at 1937 Fourth Avenue East in Hibbing. The phone number is (218) 262-3663. For more information on MDI or to inquire about services, contact Peter McDermott at (615) 999-8234 or Barb Majerus at (218) 326-9544, ext. 148. More information can also be found at www.mdi.org.

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