

More employees would help Ariens meet high demands

By David Nordby
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BRILLION – The demand for Ariens Company's products is not a problem.

The challenge for the Brillion-headquartered company is guaranteeing that it has enough employees to meet those demands.

The company holds monthly meetings with multiple departments in the company to discuss what the sales demand looks like and what the company's dealers and retail partners are preparing to order.

"It's just been one of those years where our products are in high demand," Ariens Company Vice President of Human Resources Steve Servais said.

The company currently cannot build enough product to meet the demand that exists between the dealers and retail partners.

"So, then the arrow turns to me, and it's like well, we've gotta get more people," Servais said.

The company is on the brink of finishing a complete transformation of the company's Plant 1 building that was designed to allow more capacity to get more machines produced daily.

"The big piece of that equation is you have to have people to do that as well," Servais said.

The plant has new manufacturing automation and a brand-new paint system that helps meet the high demand.

"Right now, when we have our leadership teams, this topic is kind of front and center for us. It's like the amount of people we get is literally driving the amount of product we can push out the door and ultimately sell, and we're feeling a constraint in that we don't have enough people to meet the demand right now," Servais said. "It's a good position to be in. It's a good problem to have but yet we don't want it to be a problem."

Servais said the company is currently in a "blitz effort" to get many new employees to walk through the company's door.

"I would love to have a line of people that want to get in here and work, and we have to work toward getting there because these blitz efforts we do, it's a wear and tear on



Steve Servais

everybody internally," Servais said.

Ways to attract talent to the company are wide-ranging. Servais and others attend career fairs, the company has done referral programs, and recently, they announced \$2,000 bonuses to join the company.

The \$2,000 bonus comes in fully after an employee stays 90 days. The 90-day window was not by accident.

"Based on our numbers ... there's a huge drop-off (of turnover) after that 90-day window," Servais said. "If they make it to that 90 days, we'll see our retention number really pop, so that signing bonus was kind of intentionally set up for that timeframe."

The company also relies on cultural reputation and has invested in facilities like Plant 1, the announced Brillion Learning Center on the Brillion Works site and the projects under the Ariens Hospitality Group. Servais says the company monitors the market to remain competitive with wages but the culture is where he believes the company differentiates itself the most.

"It starts with (Chairman and CEO) Dan (Ariens). He's not your typical CEO. He's the guy who feels like your next-door neighbor. He walks around, says hello to everybody, everybody on the plant floor knows him," Servais said.

"We're really trying to differentiate ourselves a little bit to say, 'Hey, Ariens has a lot to offer.' We've always had a great culture here, it's a great place to work. A lot of people have been here 30, 40, 50 years and we're trying to get that message out there," Servais added.

Close to 60 percent of the company's roughly 1,400 employees in the Brillion area commute for work. Servais said that they want to show it is worth the drive for employees.

"But by the same token, we're trying to revitalize Brillion to the point of saying don't make the drive, move here because we've invested all the STEM curriculum into the elementary, middle and high schools. With the daycare now, it really starts to build a good story of why not live here, and we feel we can give you the employment to really round the package out," Servais said.

Servais says, when asked, that finding people to hire is the type of thing that keeps him up at night.

"The labor market is so tight right now, and with the pandemic, there's a lot of people, because of the virus itself, they don't want to work. They want to be at home, and I totally understand that," Servais said.

Servais says more parents at home with students during virtual schooling is another thing that has hurt the company's efforts to hire.

While they look for new people to hire, Servais says they are also working to hold onto existing employees.

"I can't ever get over that hurdle if I keep losing 50 percent of our workforce on a monthly basis, right? That's a no-win gain. We've been really successful at keeping our turnover down," Servais said.

Servais said that the manufacturing workforce often jumps all over, including up to 50 percent of a company's employees. Ariens Company is closer to 30 percent or below.

"I'd love to see those numbers lower, but I'll take those right now," Servais said. "We do a lot of things to make sure we retain them."

Servais said that there is growth opportunity in the company and the Ariens Academy.

Of people he is trying to bring into the company, Servais says the company could hire between 200-300 full-time people between now and the end of the year to keep up with demand and employee turnover.

"If 200 people lined up at the door right now, I'd hire them all," Servais said.

The open positions are throughout the company and include all three shifts. They are using radio and billboard advertising to try to bring in new applicants, in addition to the bonus.

Even as new employees are needed, it is far from gloom for the company though. The company's history and footprint in Brillion is an asset, Servais says.

"If you think about the small community that we're in, we as a company really have the opportunity to make a mark in the community. The interaction that we have with the local schools, we can embed Ariens Company ... with the STEM stuff. It allows us to really separate from that perspective," Servais said.

He adds working with Brillion officials on projects like the Brillion Works and city's wildlife is unique.

"It allows us in a smaller footprint to really make a big difference that can be felt by the people that live here," Servais said. "If we were in a

bigger community like Green Bay or Appleton, we could still do some great things but it might get lost in the shuffle ... where here, when we do some things like this, I truly feel like the people who live in the surrounding community, they really feel and reap the benefits of that, so it's a huge positive for us."

While the pandemic has created some challenges for filling positions, it has also been part of the reason for the increase in demand of the company's products.

The company hit a rough patch during the pandemic, but was one of the only power equipment companies in the United States to keep operating as much as it did, even when as much as 50 percent of the workforce was away from the building.

"Then all of a sudden as things started to at least stabilize a little bit, things just took off," Servais said. "This pandemic has helped our business because people are staying at home a lot more and they're investing in products to improve their yard and landscaping."

The company had a large increase in its lawn and garden products and are now feeling that same demand for the winter.

"It's odd but the pandemic has actually driven a big spike in our products because our products help the homeowner, and people are staying home," Servais said.

An influx of employees will help the company meet that demand.

"At some point in time, I want to get us to the point where we're truly an employer of choice," Servais said.