

Rethink Robotics' Baxter Drives Flexibility, Fills Labor Gap at Premier Metal Fabricator

Finding skilled labor had become a significant problem for Rapid-Line Inc., a leading metal fabricator based in Wyoming, Michigan. For the company's president, Mark Lindquist, the shortage of labor came to a point where change was needed for the company to continue to compete in a crowded market. Lindquist turned to automation, making a significant investment that has revitalized the company and tripled sales per square foot.

While Rapid-Line has never been a laggard when it comes to automation on the plant floor, the last three years have represented a marked shift for the company which started in 1926. Part of the new investment in automation was the introduction of two Baxter robots, with the goal of providing workforce support while maintaining flexibility.



Filling the Gap and Driving Consistency

Baxter became more than just something that could fill Rapid-Line's workforce needs, it was a solution that could help the company improve its consistency and maintain its part quality.

Baxter works in conjunction with the Haas VF-3 milling machine to create fabricated steel parts for office furniture and panels, feeding and removing parts from the machine. Deployed in February of 2015, Baxter handles more than 600 parts per day, and met the return on investment (ROI) goals for Rapid-Line in just four months.

"One of our primary goals with Baxter is to have a robot that can work closely with our employees while maintaining the product consistency and quality that we need," said Lindquist. "Baxter has helped enormously with that and we've seen terrific results in terms of ROI, throughput and product quality."

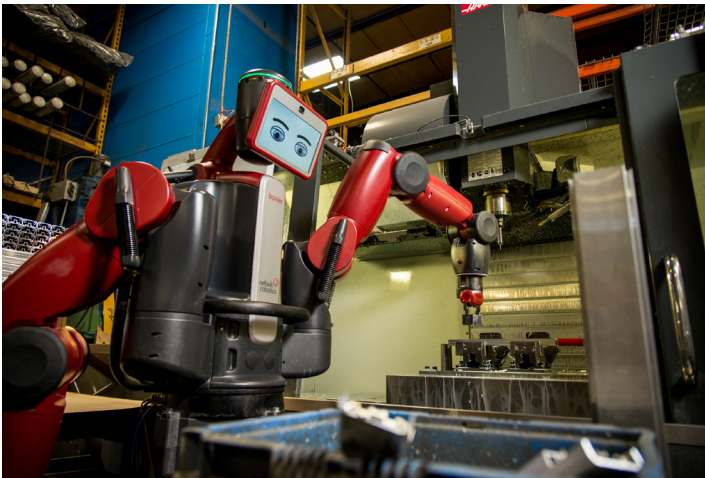
Rapid-Line has invested more than \$2 million in automation upgrades since 2013 with a variety of different products. Along with Baxter, the company runs several other machines and production lines during the night, resulting in about 120 hours of "lights out" production per week.

Flexibility and the Future

In 1989, Lindquist purchased the company and began an employee stock ownership plan (ESOP) in 1994. Today Rapid-Line's 150-plus employees own 100 percent of the company.

Now, with the introduction of Baxter and a continued commitment to technology, the metal fabricator sees a bright future.

"A lot of companies that invest in automation find themselves in trouble because they are stuck with a single way to manufacture a product," said Lindquist. "We've put ourselves in a position where we're able to mitigate the problems we have with filling out a workforce without limiting our flexibility. Baxter is a big part of that solution as the robot can handle a variety of parts and work in a variety of jobs on our floor."



Lindquist's foresight has allowed the company to improve processing times to stay competitive, responding to orders within 6-8 hours and constantly improving throughput while maintaining the company's high standard of product quality.

Rapid-Line is leading the way toward the factory of the future, where smart, flexible machines will help companies improve their processes, make better business decisions and stay competitive.

"It's no secret that manufacturing has shifted, and products like Baxter are helping our company grow and continue to thrive in the era of Industry 4.0 and beyond," said Lindquist.



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