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Small EMS Companies Benefitting from Green

By Pamela J. Gordon, Technology Forecasters Blog

May 20, 2013

Owners of small electronics manufacturers are already courageous - providing big-company manufacturing quality with minimal equipment and personnel. So when I find Tier IV (less than US$50M annual revenues) contract manufacturers whose success owes in part to their sustainability initiatives, they are double heroes in my book. Here are two of them.

After running customers' boards through its precisely-tuned PCB water-cleaning process, Digicom Electronics (Oakland, Calif.) has two outputs: 1) assemblies that achieve levels of cleanliness far above IPC cleanliness standards, standard expectations (based on independent, licensed, lab testing verifying ion- and contamination-free levels) and 2) water that is clean, recycled, and ready to use again. Digicom GM Mo Ohady (who with engineer David Estes designed the cleaning and recycling systems according to proprietary settings and a collaboration of systems) says humbly, "I care about our customers' product reliability, and I see no need to use water once and waste it. Through filtering and recycling, our system makes discharging of waste both economical and environmentally friendly."

The business implications? The growing number of customers who demand critically clean boards seek out Digicom, the products perform longer in the field, Digicom's water bills are down, and employees and customers alike have the satisfaction of saving money while reducing environmental impact.

Being smart about efficiency is also why Digicom recently certified to DfE Online(R), a training course in designing and producing electronics that use minimal resources with maximum reliability. David Estes says, "Implementing Design for Environment effectively needs to start at the product's conceptual stage, so enlist your DfE-knowledgeable contract manufacturer early in the process. It's a big benefit to weigh environmental factors for different materials and parts, and to end up with lower overall product costs and environmental impact."

Absolute Turnkey (Santa Clara, Calif.) specializes in building electric-motor controllers, solar converters, and other clean-tech electronics - in addition to serving the medical and automotive industries. And the fact that these growing markets select a Tier-4 EMS company speaks to Absolute Turnkey's own priorities for efficiency and responsibility: a series of good, efficient decisions for business and the environment.

In about 2005, CEO Jeff Bullis smartly invested in 55.1-kilowatt solar arrays for the company's roof - powering lights, computers, and other needs for just over the cost of powering an individual home with conventional electricity. Chemicals used throughout the facility - board-assembly and employee break areas alike - are natural and benign. Lights are motion controlled. They recycle everything. Employees bring lunch in reusable containers from home. Last month, Bullis hired as president clean-vehicle-industry operations chief Dave Kichar to bring in many more like-minded cleantech company
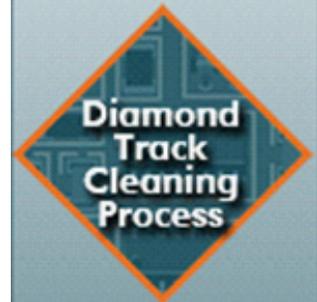
customers.

Kichar is simultaneously implementing ISO 14001 (continuous environmental improvements) and TS 16949 (enviable auto standard) - not lightweight standards for a small company, but standards that discerning cleantech and automotive customers seek. "One of the reasons for going after these certifications," says Kichar, "is that they instill employees' discipline - creating a culture that minimizes carbon footprint while doing the right thing."

Whether running large or small manufacturing companies, executives set the culture. The chiefs at Digicom and Absolute Turnkey drive efficient cars and, have efficient homes, and chose natural settings for their facilities (Digicom's new facility is on the beautiful San Leandro Bay and Absolute Turnkey has drought-resistant landscaping). Their culture underscores to all employees and customers an ethic of doing good work with minimal resources, maximum efficiency, and exemplary responsibility.

Isn't this what today's global electronics industry needs most? And if smaller companies can do so, then what's in the way of larger companies doing so? What do you think?

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