

More than just office furniture, AIS builds a beacon of belonging

BY ERIC CASEY
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As the post-COVID workforce shortages continue, as they have in the manufacturing industry for decades, Leominster office furniture and fixtures manufacturer AIS has baked workforce development and productivity efforts into its culture, part of an overall philosophy of striving to be a beacon of belonging for its employees.

AIS' efforts to have a positive impact on employees are so extensive they are hard to summarize, but at the heart of this complex web of internal and external opportunities, employee enrichment efforts, and leadership development initiatives is a rather simple premise: A proper culture creates the right behaviors, which leads to the right results.

"If you walk on our factory floor, you hear two words constantly everywhere: trust and respect," said Steve Savage, chief operating officer at AIS. "If you don't have trust and respect, you don't have a culture."

AIS has created this culture by respecting the needs and desires of its diverse 1,000+ employee workforce, where 35 different nationalities are represented, 40% of workers are female, and more than 60 employees participate in Radiance, the company's program for neurodiverse workers. Each employee is empowered to provide feedback and ideas via surveys, and the company's Best Idea Award is given out at monthly meetings, a system encouraging and rewarding improvement.

AIS seeks to foster this cooperative spirit

inside and outside of the workplace via its Boost program, an employee-run, company-sponsored initiative seeking to create social and philanthropic opportunities for workers both inside and outside the facility. Boost includes everything from recreational softball and soccer matches, to volunteering at Leominster's annual Johnny Appleseed Arts & Cultural Festival, to providing meals for families in need, all designed to enhance employees' well-being and sense of culture.

The company's workforce development extends to creating the next generation of employees and encouraging the continued progression of existing members of their team. AIS works with local colleges and high schools to provide apprenticeship opportunities and other skill-building efforts.

The largest hurdle to overcome with this program is the fact parents of these potential workers are often befuddled about their children's desire to want to work at a factory, a result of lack of understanding as to what the company's high-tech and engaging environment is truly like, said Sharyn Williams, senior marketing manager at AIS.

"We are not talking about dark and dangerous," she said, referring to preconceived notions of what manufacturing facilities are like. "We're talking about skills and being well-paid and lots of opportunities for advancement."

Combined, all of these efforts have led to an environment where workers' individuality is encouraged, rather than being sanded down to fit into a preconceived package.

"We're one big wacky family," Savage said. **W**



The factory team at AIS display their certificates from workforce training.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT & PRODUCTIVITY AWARD

AIS

Location: Leominster

Industry subsector: Office furniture and systems

Founded: 1989

Employees: 841, plus 190 temp workers for a total of 1,031

Top executives: CEO Nick Haritos and COO Steve Savage

Primary products: Office furniture, casegoods

What makes a manufacturer excellent? Excellence comes from within, and it starts with respect. Respect for team members' ideas, experiences, and differences while encouraging individual contributions is a key driver of excellence. Nurturing our talent and respecting diverse approaches results in excellence for AIS' teams, manufacturing processes, and ultimately our products and services.

AIS employs more than 1,000 full-time and temp workers at its Leominster facility.



PHOTOS | COURTESY OF AIS