

No work shortages in nuclear power

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Tom Thomson has a problem most other business owners would die for.

During this recession, when other companies are laying off staff, cutting budgets and even shutting down, he's so busy he hardly has time to chat.

Thomson's annual revenues have more than doubled to \$8.1 million, his workforce has grown to 41 people from 16 a year ago and he's looking for 10 more qualified staff right now.

Thomson is chair of Axiom NDT Corp., a Cambridge-based firm that inspects welds, pipes, boilers and other steel materials at nuclear power plants and other industrial facilities to ensure they don't break, corrode or fail.

The reason his company has been so busy lately is that there is no shortage of work in the nuclear power industry. Aging reactors in Canada are in need of upgrading and retrofitting and the Organization of Candu Industries predicts the planet will need 200 new reactors in the next 11 years, he says.

Axiom currently has 28 employees working on the refurbishment of two reactors at the Bruce Power nuclear station near Kincardine.

It also has workers at the Pickering and Darlington nuclear stations in Ontario and has been asked to bid on work at the Point Lepreau plant in New Brunswick and at the Gentilly, Que., station.

And coming in July is a major decision from the province on which of three companies will be hired to build two new reactors in the province, likely at the Darlington station.

If the province picks Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd., the only Canadian company in the running, it will mean even more work for Axiom NDT, which has done plenty of testing on AECL's Candu reactors. Even if AECL isn't chosen, the new reactors will still keep inspection machines blinking overtime at Axiom.

"There's been a bit of an explosion in workload," Thomson says. "Consequently, revenues have increased dramatically."

The NDT in Axiom's name stands for "non-destructive testing." It's an analysis technique used in scientific fields to test or evaluate a product without breaking or disabling it, which saves time and money.

In the nuclear industry, Axiom's services are critical. Equipment failure is not an option, nor is dismantling machinery in an industry known for cost overruns.

Among the technologies Axiom uses is a process called industrial ultrasound.

It's similar to a medical imaging machine except it uses much higher frequencies to create an internal image of a steel product, Thomson says.

A native of Scotland, Thomson worked in the marine engineering field in his native country before immigrating to Canada in 1988. He launched Axiom out of his Kitchener home in 1990.

Initially the company stayed small with Thomson as the main shareholder, and his wife Pauline and partner, Eric Kivlin, now Axiom's president, owning minor stakes.

Growth started to occur in 2002 after Thomson, a rabid soccer fan, sold his interest in a Scottish professional soccer team, Greenock Morton.

For several years, Axiom rented space at a plant in Cambridge owned by a major customer. In 2006, it purchased the unit it now occupies on Vondrau Drive near Maple Grove Road and Fountain Street.

In early 2008, Axiom was purchased by a major customer, Kinetics Inc., the research and development group of the old Ontario Hydro.

"There were good synergies between us," says Thomson. "And they wanted to encourage us to grow."

His main challenge now?

"Handling the growth and hiring qualified people."

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