



Mark Loper, president and CEO of AZCO in the town of Menasha, originally practiced law after graduating from college. He joined AZCO as general counsel in 1987 and took the company reins in 1997. The Business News photo by Amanda Lauer

Started 60 years ago, AZCO focus changed

Mechanical-contracting company now serves a variety of industries

By Amanda Lauer

alauer@thebusinessnewsonline.com

For 60 years, a company with roots in the town of Menasha has offered services from A to Z. That concept actually inspired the name of the business — AZCO INC.

When the doors first opened for this mechanical-contracting company, their focus was on serving the pulp and paper industry, which was prevalent in the Fox Valley at the time.

Through the years, its focus has expanded. Today, AZCO provides heavy industrial-construction and fabrication services across the country, serving the power generation, metal casting, general manufacturing and food and beverage industries.

Mark Loper, president and CEO of AZCO, is a Menasha native himself. He has been with the company since 1986 and was actually hired by the original owner, John Barlow. "John was a mover and a shaker in the Fox River Valley. He was the driver behind the Avenue Mall when that was built in Appleton. He also was owner of Earth Resources at the time. The planetarium at UW-Fox Valley was named in his honor," Loper said.

A background in law may not seem conducive to running a construction business, but Loper has handled the company admirably. "I graduated from St. Mary Central High School in Menasha in 1972," he said. "I got my undergraduate degree in business and finance from Marquette University. Then I went to law school at Madison. I practiced law for two years in Menasha. Then I went with the Farm Credit System for five years. In '86 a friend of mine put me in contact here with our founder. I had no construction background, but I think he felt that he could mold me. I was hired as the general counsel."

In 1997, Loper became the president of AZCO. A year later Barlow, who was 84 at the time, put the wheels into motion to form an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP).

"He and a group of us managers formed this ESOP to acquire his majority interest in the company," Loper said. "It was highly-leveraged, and we were able to work through that and really pay off our debt much sooner than we anticipated."

Loper described the extent of AZCO's business. "When we first started our ESOP, we were probably doing about a third in the food and beverage industry, a third in metal casting/foundry and steel mill industry, and a third in power generation. With my partner John Trottier's hire about 19 years ago, he brought a tremendous power-generation background to us. Our focus has shifted and

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AZCO/It originally served the paper industry

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our strengths have been developed around the power generation sector in the last 10 to 12 years. We've established ourselves as a nationally recognized power generation contractor."

The company has its office staff at its location in the town of Menasha and they have five fabrication facilities throughout the Fox Valley. "We are fabricating process and power piping as well as some heavy industrial duct work — plate work fabrication for these industries," Loper said. "For years, we were viewed as a pipe fabricator but because of the variety of pipe we weld and the different metal compositions, we have some special people that can weld anything. Now, we're doing specialty welding."

He said ESOP participants total about 70 right now. "These are the non-union office, administrative staff," Loper said. "The craft people come out of the respective hiring halls in the locations that we perform the work. There's a core group of union supervisors based here in Appleton that go out and lead these work crews. On that front, we're probably at between 350 and 400 craft people."

The area that AZCO generally covers is in the upper Midwest, but they've worked in 34 or 35 different states through the years. "Parts are fabricated here, then shipped to the job sites, then the union guys install and weld on the scene as needed," Loper said. "We're also a third-party fabricator where we just do the fabrication for another contractor, and they do the installation work at their job site."

The company has experienced significant growth in the last 11 years. "We were in the \$30-some million range before the ESOP and after we formed the ESOP and changed our management team, we've blown the doors off with some tremendous growth," Loper said.

Recently, AZCO received certificates of

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authorization for nuclear work. "We see a nuclear renaissance on the horizon," he said, "particularly with the issue of global warming and the carbon dioxide implications of that."

Surpassing the five-million man hour mark with no lost time incidents this past August was a huge accomplishment for AZCO.

"It's been a major culture shift to this whole zero-injuries approach to safety management," Loper said. "Sending people home safely every night is a proud achievement for all of us."

It's been just an incredible ride for everyone at AZCO, according to Loper. "We've taking on increasingly complex projects with great people working together," he said. "When John Trottier came in, he had the ability to work with the crafts of the different trades and blend them all together to take the full-service approach to a project. For a while, there A to Z was in name only. I think now this ability to have the iron workers, the millwrights, the boilermakers and the pipefitters all come together with some key leadership and deliver full service to a project, that's probably one of the most gratifying things."