Kolp Promoted to Plant Manager

Sandy Kolp has been promoted to Plant Manager. Previously, she was a Firstronic Program Manager, where she successfully led the launch of two automotive programs during 2013.

“Sandy has nearly two decades of experience in the electronics manufacturing services (EMS) industry, including both program management and quality management positions. This gives her very unique perspective because she understands both the customer expectation side and operations side of the equation. As we enter a phase of unprecedented growth, I’m very pleased to have someone as experienced and enthusiastic as Sandy in this position,” said John Sammut, CEO.

During her time at Firstronic, Sandy has held positions in planning, program management, and quality both as a Quality Engineer and Quality Manager. Prior to joining Firstronic, Sandy was the Quality Manager for an EMS company in Gaylord, MI.

She holds a Six Sigma Black Belt certification and is a strong proponent of a holistic focus on continuous improvement. She received a Bachelor’s of Science degree from Ferris State University.

Firstronic Adds Inline Solder Paste Inspection Systems

Firstronic added Pemtron TROI-5700HL high speed, inline 3D solder paste inspection systems to its SMT production lines in February. The new equipment is located between the screen printer and first pick-and-place module. Unlike 2D units which measure solder paste height and width at a few predetermined points on the PCB, this unit provides volumetric feedback on length, width and height of all pads on the PCB.

The equipment has been installed on two existing SMT lines and will shortly be added to the third SMT line that Firstronic recently purchased and is now configuring. These upgrades are part of a $2.45 million investment that Firstronic is making in building renovations, machinery, and equipment to support planned business growth over the next two years.

“Solder paste deposition is a critical step from a quality perspective because if it is incorrect it can drive a wide range of defects. Inspecting at this point in the process is the lowest cost way to eliminate defect opportunities because no components have been placed. The screen printing process has some level of variability. Having this inspection step gives us early warning if a stencil needs cleaning or maintenance. We will also use this as a tool to support customer quality data collection and will be communicating with our customer base to update our PFMEAs and control plans relative to this additional control tool,”

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Firstronic Named Newsmaker of the Year Finalist by Biz Journal

Firstronic was named one of three finalists in the Manufacturing Category of the Grand Rapids Business Journal’s Newsmakers of the Year Awards. CEO John Sammut accepted an award on Firstronic’s behalf at an Award Breakfast on Jan. 29th.

“Contract manufacturing is somewhat of a stealth industry. Most companies our size, typically don’t make headlines in general business publications. However, thanks to our recent growth announcements, we were competing with two companies in the manufacturing category who are literally household names in sporting goods and pharmaceuticals. It was really a privilege to be hailed as a company who is becoming known as an economic driver in this region,” said John Sammut, CEO.

Business Journal Editor Carole Valade called the awards, “recognition of industry talent and regional success” and highlighted the fact that the awards competition had been designed to recognize that there are many companies in a range of industries contributing to regional economic success. The industry segments recognized were Manufacturing, Real Estate and Development, Retail, Health Care, Law, Technology, Sports/Arts & Entertainment, Non-profits/Philanthropy, Government and Education.

SPI Systems Installed

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said Maurice Hellebuyck, Director of Program Management and Engineering.

Although the new equipment has just been installed, it is already contributing to the elimination of defect opportunities.

“We’ve found this is not only a good process control tool, it is also helping identify supplier quality issues. For example, it recently rejected a panel that had an error in the HASL finish. A pad that was supposed to be rectangular was circular. Uncaught, this could have caused tombstoning or created solder bridges,” added Hellebuyck.

“We see this investment as bringing us to the next level of process capability, quality and repeatability. Our customers are now requiring some level of solder paste inspection and we’ve opted for the most comprehensive and scalable solution. When we upgrade our screen printers, these units will be able to send feedback to the screen printer to adjust settings if paste deposition becomes inconsistent with control limits. Our business volume continues to grow and high speed automated solutions such as these SPI units are helping us ensure that we can continue to deliver superior quality at competitive cost,” said John Sammut, CEO.
Firstronic has adopted a 24/7 work schedule that has production employees working twelve-hour shifts on alternating three-day and four-day weeks. There are four shifts. Shifts one and two work the same schedule of long and short weeks, with shifts three and four covering the alternate weeks. Employee training is scheduled in four-hour blocks on one of the days during employees’ four-day “long” week off. Employees are paid for training time and can pick the day and time block that works best with their schedules.

“We’ve taken this innovative scheduling approach because it maximizes employee free time, plus enables us to schedule training without interrupting normal work flow. Employees like it and we’ve done our best to provide a range of options that lets employees with childcare or other obligations select a time that fits their schedule. It also allows us to provide a significant amount of training over a relatively short period of time,” said Tony Bellitto, Director of Quality.

The new training program has three phases scheduled to roll out in the first three quarters of 2014. Phase I focuses on Core Training for all employees, Phase II will provide Advanced System Training and Phase III will define/implement Certified Operator Training (COT) Evaluations and Classifications.

Phase I training is in progress and involves 29 hours of classroom training over eight weeks that includes general human resources-related training on health and safety; basic production related training on board handling, component identification, ESD protection, ERP system data entry and Kanban systems; and seven modules of IPC-A-610 certification courses.

Phase II training will begin in May and covers the Plex ERP system in more detail and will also cover the requirements of the ISO quality standards re-
Firstronic More Than Doubles Inventory Turns

Firstronic has more than doubled inventory turns from 4-5 annually to 10-12 annually. The improvement is the result of a Lean supply chain initiative begun last year.

“The improvements are a combination of the maturation of our Kanban strategy and growth in revenue. When we set our initial Kanban bin sizes with suppliers, we calculated size based on anticipated volume production run rates. Now that these projects have entered volume production, turns are increasing because the material is being consumed at optimum rates for the bin sizes. We’ve also burned off the transitional inventory that we’d gotten from some of the projects won last year,” said Wally Johnson, Vice President Supply Chain.

Johnson also praised Firstronic’s team for their contributions.

“This was one of the smoothest launches I’ve seen thanks to support from our Materials Manager Brad Albert and our Kanban Coordinator Nancy Quero. The shift leads were also instrumental in this initiative’s success because they drove the buy-in and support of our production personnel. Without that support and participation it can’t work,” Johnson added.

Johnson began ‘leaning’ Firstronic’s supply chain practices in early 2013. As part of that process he developed in-depth supplier relationships that focused on optimized lot sizes and pull signals. Under this philosophy buffers are defined and suppliers are focused on protecting the buffer. When schedules change, the material management team focuses on managing any exceptions related to refilling the buffer, instead of having to expedite material to the floor.

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“By focusing further back in the pipeline, we give suppliers more time to respond. The buffers ensure we can flexibly support our customers’ schedule change needs. It is a win-win for everyone and once our supply chain understood the benefits, they were willing to support it,” Johnson said.

Another interesting aspect is that these turns are being done without Vendor-Managed Inventory (VMI).

“If I added VMI, we could probably exceed 20 turns annually, but we’d need to allocate more floor space for that inventory. Given the choice between consignment inventory and a Siemens line, I’d rather see that floor space utilized for production. We do use VMI for MRO because it doesn’t take up significant floor space and makes good business sense,” Johnson said.

Website Upgraded to Reflect Expanding Capabilities

Firstronic launched an upgraded website in late December that better reflects its capabilities as a multinational electronics manufacturing services (EMS) provider.

“Over the last two years, Firstronic has been evolving in terms of size, internal processes and geographies served. We wanted to highlight our ability to support customers wanting a one-stop source which included Asian and EU production options as well as the holistic Lean manufacturing approach that is making our “Made in USA” solution competitive. While our commitment to superior quality and service isn’t changing, our ability to provide a much broader range of capabilities and solutions is increasing substantially. The new site shares that vision,” said John Sammut, CEO.

Visit www.firstronic.com to view the full site.
Training

(Continued from page 3)

lated to the products that Firstronic builds.

By the implementation of Phase III in June, all job descriptions and competency evaluations will be finalized. Every employee will be evaluated for COT classification and there will be a pay-for-skills component to incentivize workers who cross-train in multiple competencies.

Firstronic is also working with local employment agencies to develop and launch a pre-entry screening training specific to Electronic Manufacturing. This initiative will: help ensure that potential new employees better understand the manufacturing environment, more quickly identify candidates with the basic skills required to be successful employees and integrate a portion of the new hire training program into the hiring process before employees ever walk through the door.

“Training at this level ultimately pays for itself. Cross-trained workers allow for more flexible production scheduling. Production operators with good understanding of how their jobs fit into the overall factory flow are more productive and often have great ideas for improvement. And most importantly, production operators with a good understanding of the drivers of product quality, help eliminate defects before they occur. Our goal is to build a cohesive, well-trained team that demonstrates that our ‘Made in USA’ continues to be a cost competitive, high quality manufacturing option,” added Bellitto.