**Transcript\_Podcast#3\_Workforce Lens\_ Morton Industries**

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** Greetings, and welcome to the third installment of the podcast series, “The Workforce Lens,” brought to you by Tarrant County College in North Texas. I am Shannon Bryant, Executive Vice President for Corporate Solutions & Economic Development, and I will be your host, moderating strategic conversations with employers and economic developers on all things related to preparing and growing the workforce today and in the future.

Today we want to welcome our guests from Morton Industries. Our guests today include Steve Stewart, Director of Organizational Development, and Robb Herbig, Vice President of Business Development and General Manager. Welcome, gentlemen, we're happy to have you here.

**Robb Herbig:** Thank you.

**Steve Stewart:** Good morning.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** I want to start a little bit with an introduction as to who Morton is -- so Morton is a customized tube fabrication company that is headquartered in Morton, Illinois, and here within the past few years Morton has expanded their operation with a new location in Fort Worth, Texas. If you can, gentlemen, can you briefly tell us, not only your name, but tell us a little bit more about your role at the organization.

**Robb Herbig:** Okay. My name is Robb Herbig and I'm the Vice President of Business Development. My role for the past few years has been to diversify our business.Traditionally, we were a one or two customer-based business in Illinois, and we've seen a lot of ups and downs with the economy, so we want to diversify to get into some different customer bases, different products, so that's what I've done over the last few years with my good friend Steve.

**Steve Stewart:** My name is Steve Stewart, Director of Organizational Development.So, my role here at Morton Industries has been to basically work with people, development of people and working with leaders on development and leadership. So those are the main spaces that I play.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** Wonderful. That’s a great position. People are our number one asset, right?

**Steve Stewart:** Correct, yes, I agree.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** So, let's get started. Rob, can you tell us a little bit more. I read a summary about Morton industries, but can you tell our audience a little bit more about Morton industries, such as the products that you produce, their purpose and the industries that you serve. How many years has Morton been in business, and the number of employees that you currently have in both Illinois, as well as here in Fort Worth?

**Robb Herbig:** Sure. So, Morton Industries was founded about 75 years ago. In fact, this year is our 75th Anniversary. Morton, Illinois started, basically in a garage, by a gentleman who started by fixing agriculture implements for local farmers. Over time it has grown, and now we service the off-highway construction, mining, and agricultural industries. So, companies like Caterpillar, John Deere, and Komatsu, are some of our three largest customers. We serve many others in different markets, as part of the diversification process I spoke of earlier. We have approximately 673 employees in Illinois and, in Texas, we're up to about 25 right now.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** Right, and you have large of expansion plans here in Texas as well?

**Robb Herbig:** I think our plan is to get to around 100-plus people.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** So, on that note, as we mentioned, you just recently in the past couple of years moved to North Texas. You have a location here now at Fort Worth that I have had the privilege to be able to tour and see the great work that you're doing there. Can you tell us a little bit about why you decided to move specifically to North Texas, and how are things going with the expansion here?

**Robb Herbig:** They're going well. We decided to move to North Texas because we do have an established customer base here, and our original intention was to offer our current customers something a little more local. So, there's three or four plants in Texas that we service.

Once we've gotten here, we’ve seen there was a true need for what we do. We are a tube fabricator, so we build handrails and hydraulic lines and air tubes. And, since we've been in Texas, we have grown organically. We don’t [work with] any of our customers that we were doing [business with] in Illinois. We've been able to grow organically. We outgrew the space that we originally started in over in the Farmers Branch area and we moved our plant over to Tarrant County last October, and we continue to grow. We see a lot of future business.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** That's phenomenal. So, you moved here exactly when?

**Robb Herbig:** I moved here, and we brought the employees, the first five people down from Illinois, in September of 2009.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** And you've had that much growth that you've had to move to another plant already.

**Robb Herbig:** Yes.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** And you're growing everything organically, so all new business – can’t get better than that. That's great, that's awesome.

So, Steve, as a director of organizational development, I'm sure you are particularly concerned about adding and maintaining new talent for the organization. And after I was looking through your website, I noticed you're hiring for a great number of skilled positions across the entire Morton footprint. And, so I'm curious to know what are some of the positions that you're finding most difficult to fill? I want to reference just a couple of the positions that you have, because a lot of the positions that you're promoting for right now are highly skilled labor positions. Some of those that I saw are saw operators, machine operators, production welders, orbital TIG welders, robotic MIG welders, manufacturing engineers, they all sound very highly skilled. So, tell us a little bit about what that talent acquisition and retention pool of hiring right now looks like at Morton.

**Steve Stewart:** Finding welders and new vendor machinists is always a challenge, and it's been that way in manufacturing for quite some time. I think one of the messages that we all need to get out is that the manufacturing careers are no longer dark, dirty places. It's really a space that is very clean. It’s higher technology now and it does require a different skill set. So, you know, the training part is very important. But I think, having people understand manufacturing, what it is today, that it is a clean environment, and there are great opportunities in manufacturing, is very important. I think at Morton industries, it's always about trying to get the right people. So, [it is about] recruiting the right people, being able to train them, and then being able to provide opportunities. The things that are most important to us are just finding the people of right character that fit our culture. And then, number two, is finding people with a very positive attitude, a can-do attitude, and then finding people that are very hungry to learn, people that are very driven, always wanting to learn more. We can take those individuals and we can then train them in those skill sets that we have here at Morgan industries, so the training part is very important. As they move forward and have opportunities to grow, we want to be able to provide those opportunities for them.

So, finding [the right people] is difficult but it can be done. Sometimes it takes time. Having those pieces in place is very important to us.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** Absolutely. So, just a couple of quick questions on that. Steve, you mentioned the fact that, for anybody who works in the manufacturing industry, one of the challenges today is pulling away from the stigma that manufacturing is a dark and dirty place. What are some of the things that Morton does in their communication, to help overcome that?

**Steve Stewart:** So, prior to the pandemic, we hosted and had open houses for high schools in our communities, and hopefully maybe we can do this at Tarrant County, as well. But here at Morton, we open our plant, and we give tours. With Caterpillar here and in Peoria, Komatsu, and Morton industries, we all open our doors up on the same day to high schools across our region. We tell them what plants to go to, and we give them tours. We bring them into our buildings, and we showcase and show them the technology, the clean environment that they can be working in. That’s just one way, but also, our human resource manager will go to the high schools. He'll speak to students about careers in manufacturing. So those are the things that we need to continue to do to build the relationships with our local schools, and even community colleges, being able to get people to see manufacturing in a different light.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** So, it sounds like you do a big celebration during Manufacturing Month, as well.

**Steve Stewart:** Yes, we opened our doors during October of every year. We also do what's called Career Sparks for eighth grade students. This year it was virtual. So, there was a virtual platform where our manufacturing companies here in Peoria, as a team, build out manufacturing booths for each [area], like a welding booth, one for machining, one for engineering, etc. But yes, getting people engaged and being able to see manufacturing is very important, because a lot of times what they hear from their grandparents or parents may not be the right thing. Manufacturing is all about the different careers.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** It is a different world today, for sure. So, Rob let’s flip the question over to you a little bit. Tell us a little bit more about where you're finding the talent, especially here in North Texas, and what are some of the challenges that you've had thus far in finding that talent?

**Robb Herbig:** So locally we use employment agencies that help us recruit, just simple for the fact that they have a lot more resources than I do. And then some of the challenges that we've had are, if we ask them to find us a couple of skilled welders, well that's a very broad term. And somebody’s understanding of that is, “hey, I'm a welder,” versus, can you come into our shop and weld what we're welding? A lot of times there's a big difference there, so we bring people in and I really look for, are they going to be a good candidate for us? Are they going to be a good team member for us? Are they going to fit within the team? Are they're going to get along with everybody?

If they do, then it’s the skill set. We have entry level jobs that somebody doesn't need any skill for. They might be working in our warehousing areas and then the shipping areas and then then, if they do have some skill sets like CNC machining or welding, then we'll put them with an individual that's been working with us to work through training those people and getting them to where they can perform the functions at our facility and meet our expectations.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** So, a little bit of a mentorship program. That's important, very, very important. So, back to your people. As we mentioned, people are indeed the number one asset to any organization, agree?

**Steve Stewart:** Yes, absolutely. The number one.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** There you go. So, as a director of organizational development for Morton, when you think of increasing productivity and efficiency in organization, you certainly can't do that without your people. This includes improving the performance of your staff and overall implementation for positive change to make the company successful under all facets of the operation. Would you say that's a fair assessment and please feel free to elaborate as that relates to your organization.

**Steve Stewart:** Absolutely, I agree that employees are the most important asset of any company. When you think of the assets, there's machines, a building, and the people are really the heart of the business. That's what creates the quality product, what creates a culture for the company, and they're the ones that take care of the customers. So, we feel that if we get those things right, if we get the right people, and we take care of each other and our customers, the performance of our staff and what we do, will follow. The profits and everything [else] will follow suit.

But first and foremost, you’ve got to get the right people that care about what they do, care about each other, and, and take care of the customers, as well. That goes along with the training part. It's hard for people to get better at what they do unless you can continue to provide training and give them opportunity.

Those are some of the important things that I can share with you here at Morton Industries. Shannon, you mentioned to grow organically. We bring somebody in that maybe doesn't have the skill set, like welding, and, At Morton, Illinois, we have [them go through] what's called our Weld Training Center. We have a full-time staff for our off-site Weld Training Center, and we can take somebody with an interest, who maybe came in at a certain job and is looking for a new opportunity. We will then allow them to apply for a welding position. And when there's an opening, they can go through the training, and they can become what we call a certified welder. That allows them to make more money, and allows them to grow, learn new skills and continue their career.

So that to me is organically growing our people and I think that's an important thing that helps us sustain our pipeline of workers that we have here.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** And that is so key, taking people who may not exactly have the skill set right now, but someone who may have the aptitude for the position, and then providing them with the right training to be able to take that knowledge and be able to apply it in that skill set of being able to do the job.

**Robb Herbig:** Yeah, I'd like to comment a little bit on myself. So, when you look at our organization from the top down, the executives in the company, me, and others, all of us have grown up through the industry. I started working in a factory when I was 18 years old. The vice president of manufacturing, who is based in Illinois, did the same thing. We've all grown up through the industry. We really look at our people the same way. So, when you look at our office staff, the people that work for us, all of them started in the factories. So, they've been the saw operators, they've been the welders, they've been the other guys, and they've shown aptitude, so we've moved them into these higher positions and let them grow. You can't replace the people [easily], those people have the knowledge and, if they're driven and they've got ambition, they're a prime candidate to move up into management roles.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** That is so wonderful to hear. You know it's all about keeping and retaining your people today, and investing in them, looking at this as an investment in your organization versus that of a cost. It really does become your work family. Absolutely so wonderful.

So, let's transition a bit, and talk about, obviously the pandemic because we know that has impacted workforce dramatically for everyone across all industries. So, Steve and Robb, this question is really for both of you. We know that the pandemic has had a significant impact on workers for all industries. Forbes just recently stated that eight in 10 businesses have fast tracked digital transformation, and 79% of these businesses are reinventing their business model because of the disruption caused by the pandemic. How has COVID impacted Morton Industries, and what changes have you made to reinvent your business model.

**Robb Herbig:** First, we do a lot more digitally. We don't have the face-to-face meetings that we used to have, especially with our customer base. I think that it's had a large [impact], where you could typically just go and get to know a customer, take them to lunch and develop a relationship with them, now you're sitting on the other end of a computer screen, so you don't get the interpersonal interaction. I think that's a very difficult thing to overcome, especially when you're on the sales side.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** You can't go to the golf course.

**Robb Herbig:** You can’t go to the golf course, and, you know, there's a lot of business deals done on the golf course, that's for sure. With the employees, it's been a little trickier. Obviously, we can't bend tubes or weld tubes digitally, so we have implemented the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines where everybody wears masks. We try to make sure that there's six feet between all the employees, we've spaced out our break room in Texas so nobody can sit next to each other, and that's had some impact. As time goes by, people have gotten used to it. People adapt and do workarounds. We've been successful completely reinventing ourselves, because, right now, we don't really have a choice.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** So, what about you, Steve. Any comments on the pandemic and how it's impacting the work that you do at Morton.

**Steve Stewart:** It's been a very interesting year because we must keep adapting as we keep learning new things. As Robb mentioned, we’ve adjusted to wearing a face mask and all those types of things. Initially, we had a COVID taskforce team that met every day at 11 a.m. We went through all the numbers, all the changes that were happening in our organization, etc. But, for us, it was always about taking care of our employees, creating a very safe work environment for them where they felt safe coming into work every day and doing work so that we’ve continued to operate. Even though there were some challenges for our current customers on getting product overseas – they were not getting it quick enough – we were able to quickly pivot and be able to get some of those parts made for them very quickly. And so, along with that, we've seen our business grow as well, gaining some market share.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** That's great. So, we take something positive out of this, right? It’s a terrible situation but we take the positives away and learn how to make that pivot and make that change. Absolutely. So, let's fast forward past COVID and this past year. Let's move on to say five years from now. Let's go to 2026. How would you highlight the successes of your company? Pertaining to the vision you have, what impact do you see not only with your workforce, but the customers you serve, as well as the economic impact to the communities where you operate both in Illinois and now here in North Texas?

**Robb Herbig:** So, our growth plan for Texas, is to have 100-plus people and have multiple facilities in the DFW area, over the next five years. I think we're aggressively going after that and I think we're going to be at 100-plus within the next two to three years. And then we're just going to continue to grow. If we outgrow the building, we'll look for the next one, so we don't have any indication that we're not going to be able to make these goals, and it's just been a great ride. We're going to do the same things we’re doing.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** Growing and having to find new buildings, that's a great problem. So, this next question is for both of you. What about the changing skill sets moving to the future, let's say 2026 or even beyond, or even within the next year? We know technology is constantly changing, what are the changing skill sets for Morton Industries that you can see right now on the horizon? And what will you need and expect of your future workforce to ensure that you continue to have a competitive advantage for the long term.

**Steve Stewart:** I think, when we step back and look at this, it's going to require the whole team. And, I think we all need to have the attitude of being willing to learn and look under every rock to see what it is that we can learn from the new technology coming down the pipeline. Along with that, it's going to require a lot of training. Maybe Tarrant County College could be a part of that, helping us train on new technology and, and partner with us on that. When you think of [new] manufacturing [technology], it’s augmented reality and artificial intelligence. Even in many of the assembly lines [today], you see where robots can make decisions based on what's in front of them. So, I think technology is going to change for a lot of our manufacturing plants even at Morton Industries.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** Tarrant County College is indeed here to serve you. We want to be your workforce solutions provider for your growth here, so we're excited to have you here and want to assist you in any way at all.

Here’s another question for you, Steve, or both of you. Community and stakeholder collaboration is key to the success of every organization. As we end today, tell us a little bit about the community partners like community colleges, the Economic Development Offices, the Chambers you've worked with since you've been here. How are you closely aligning with these organizations and what benefit are they offering to Morton?

**Steve Stewart:**  I think with any business, having partnerships locally is important. We can do manufacturing extremely well, but then there's always going to be other things that we need, such as recruiting or such as training. Community partners are very important, such as TCC and other agencies in the area, to help our businesses grow and provide the right training, provide the right people.

I was very impressed when I toured Tarrant County Community College with you, Shannon, and the equipment that you have, the training that you can provide, was very impressive. So, I think it will be a good partnership. Robb has worked with a few recruiting agencies, the Fort Worth Chamber – Netty Matthews [Vice President of Business Engagement at Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce] has been fantastic at connecting us as a new company in town. She was very welcoming, and it was cool how she was helpful in connecting us with the right people. Workforce Solutions for Tarrant County was also very helpful. For me it was great to feel the warm welcome from the community, and I'm sure, Robb, you can comment on your experience coming down to the Fort Worth area. I’ll let you share your feelings on that.

**Robb Herbig:** I’ll just echo some of the same statements. It's been great, everybody's been very welcoming. On any questions we have, we’ve gotten lots of offers to help in any way. We appreciate that. I think the key is building strong partnerships and having resources going forward for both of us. Maybe TCC is helping us with some of our workforce needs and we come over and show students what it's like in a real factory. We can do tours and things like that, so I think it's great for everybody.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** That's wonderful. That's what it's all about. Collaboration and alignment. That helps grow not only our workforce, but it also helps to grow and retain the talent pipeline. We all rise together. Gentlemen, I have been very pleased to have you both here today. Do you have any closing comments for our audience today?

**Robb Herbig:** Just that we're glad to be in Texas and we look forward to growing our business here. If there's one message to all the young people out there, be patient with your career. Work hard and don't expect the world when you first start. It'll come to you, you’ve just got to persevere and work through it.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** Absolutely, and Steve?

**Steve Stewart:** Thank you for the opportunity to share. It's been fun to be on the podcast and share a little bit about Morton Industries. Thanks for having us.

**Shannon Bryant (Host):** Absolutely, we appreciate you all being here today and welcome to North Texas! With that we will close out and we will look forward to seeing everyone next time on The Workforce Lens. Thank you.