

Mexican Workers Up to The Challenge of Life On the Factory Floor

Julie Poucher Harbin

Victor Jimenez is the manufacturing operations manager assigned to the Tijuana operations of Milwaukee-based Xymox Technologies Inc. An engineer who is in his 30s, Jimenez supervises about 50 workers who assemble membrane switches for Xymox at BC Manufacturing, a Mexican-owned maquiladora whose three facilities are managed by San Diego-based Vertek International, Inc., a maquiladora management services company.



The switches are used in refrigerators and freezers (General Electric and LG Electronics are two of their clients), gas pump displays, microwave ovens, stair exercise machines, intravenous systems, and other products. He gave the San Diego Business Journal a tour of the 35,000-square-foot facility.

Question: What's the average age and education of the workers here?

Answer: 23-24. Most of them have only high school or primary school (education).

Q: Mainly women?

A: Yes. We have found for the detailed jobs that require skill, women are the best. There is no question about it. Men for heavy jobs, lifting boxes, lifting product, using the warehouse. Right now we have more women working on die-cut machines than men.

Q: How many hours do you work a week?

A: It's a 48-hour workweek. We work Monday through Friday for 9.6 hours a day. We have 20 minutes in the morning for breakfast. Thirty minutes in the afternoon for lunch at noon. And 10 minutes at 3 o'clock break. Actually I work 7 a.m. until 7 p.m. I enjoy this. A lot of people think that if you have to stay after 5 o'clock it is because you are not well-organized, but I like to be prepared for the future. I used to stay a little bit to read articles from the Internet about manufacturing techniques.

Q: How do you like working here?

A: I like it very much. I've been here for almost three years in this company. It's a pretty nice environment.

Q: What were you doing before Xymox?

A: I was working for another company. It was a textile company. We used to (make) kitchen products

(such as) oven mitts, table mats, and potholders.

Q: Was it hard to transition into high-tech manufacturing?

A: It was not so difficult because before working there, I worked for Bourns de Mexico (U.S. headquarters are in Riverside). We were building pressure transistors, a very high-tech product also, so it was no problem for me.

I have been working all the time for American companies, maquiladoras. I have never worked for any Mexican companies.

Q: How long did you have to train here?

A: A couple of months. I came over here as a manufacturing manager. I already had the experience in order to have control of people, the process, and everything. The only training I received was how to build the product and about the performance of the product.

Q: How did you get into this line of work?

A: In 1988, after I graduated from school in Durango City, I decided to move to the Tijuana area because in my town there were not too many opportunities for people coming out of school. So 95 percent of the people that just graduated from school had to move to a different area, mainly to the border where you can find jobs.

My degree is industrial production engineering. Here in the border, when I came, there were a lot of openings, a lot of opportunities. Nowadays, it's a little bit more difficult. Every year a lot of people are coming into the area trying to find a job. Every year it's harder to find a job.

Q: Are you confident you will have this kind of job for a while?

A: I don't know. I (can) tell you, in 2000, when we had this manufacturing recession, the economic recession in the United States affected us here. You know when the U.S. economy was growing very fast (in the 90s), it was reflected in our economy also. We had a lot of jobs over here. Everybody could have good money in their pockets, because we had a lot of overtime.

People used to like to work overtime in order to get a little bit more money, so everybody was happy, spending money, driving new cars. Suddenly in 2000, a lot of companies flew away, a lot of companies shut down, a lot of people lost their jobs, so it was a very frightening situation. I have friends (who didn't have) a job for seven or eight months. It affected a lot. Apparently the economy is trying to get to the same track as four years ago. I want to be here for a long time, period.

Q: Do you have a family here?

A: I'm married with three children. My wife works in the house. I have an 11-year-old boy, a 4-year-old boy, and a 2-year-old girl.