

High tech needs hands-on

By SAYWARD SPOONER

Human hands have become old technology, so far as trade work is concerned. Tried and tested crafts like screen printing are turning to machines to get more done in less time. But at what cost? Can a machine really print images with as much precision as the creature who wields opposable thumbs?

Some companies don't think so. Vision Screen Print Inc. is a new printing company in Waterloo that's still into hand-printing. They use the old hand method to print logos and images onto some of the latest electronics/technologies.

So why stick to hands? It has nothing to do with being afraid to change with the times. According to Nelson Ribeiro, general manager of Vision Screen Print Inc., it's a matter of quality. "A lot of the parts that we get are three-dimensional and it just doesn't work as well to do it automated," explains Ribeiro. "There are pad-printing machines that could do some of the things that we're doing," he concedes, "but the quality isn't as good and our technique tends to hold up better over time." Some tasks still require a true artisan, a master of his or her craft, to get the job done right. Unfortunately, print shops that still feel that way are becoming a rarity.

"There's not very many of us out there," says Ribeiro. "Most screen-printing companies become larger, they're automated, they want to do large format printing, large runs, they want to do more decals and they don't want to do the more time-consuming three dimensional parts," he explains. Fortunately for our Region's electronics industry, that sort of growth is not part of the game-plan for VSP. "We set ourselves up as a small shop," says Ribeiro. "There are only three of us here and it's a small shop so we can handle doing the small quantities and still make it cost-effective for the customer."

With only three people running the show, it has to be a real team effort for everything to run smoothly. "We all bring something different to the table," says Ribeiro who handles what he calls the "secondary" day-to-day things, like cleaning the screens or cutting up the stock material as well as the general business process. Mark Pfaff is graphic designer and Janet Allshaw does the majority of the actual printing. Part of their success as a team has come from having worked together in one way or another for the past 10 years or so. They used to all work for the same bigger print company in Waterloo - until it decided to relocate. None of the three wanted to leave Waterloo so they decided to use their acquired skills to set up their own screen printing company.

For most people, the term 'screen printing' brings to mind those boutiques in malls that print custom images on t-shirts or mugs. Vision Screen Print doesn't do textiles. As you might have guessed, the actual process for screen printing images and logos by hand on to component parts like high-tech electronics is more complicated.

The screen, a frame with a polyester mesh stretched over it, is coated with an emulsion - a water-sensitive green liquid that dries. "We'll take a film positive and we'll put it on the screen and expose the screen in front of a high density light," says Ribeiro. "What that does is everywhere that the light hits the screen, it makes it light-fast, it'll harden the



Vision Screen Print Partners (L-R): Nelson Ribeiro, general manager; Mark Pfaff, graphic designer (also shown bottom photo); and Janet Allshaw, production coordinator. The company operates out of Kitchener. Photos by Stephen Uhraney

emulsion. Everything that's hiding behind the film on the screen is able to rinse away once the screen's exposed leaving an opening," he explains. "That opening would be the image that we're printing." But it doesn't stop there.

Next, the ink has to be added to the screen and pushed through the opening using a squeegee to "lay down" the image that's burned on to the screen. Because of the types of component parts on which they often work, like control panels or covers for electronic parts, they use a lot of epoxy inks that will stick to metal. "The types of inks that we use, off-set printers can't do," says Ribeiro.

And because they specialize in hand-printing the parts that many larger automated printing companies aren't set

up to do, a lot of the screens have to be custom-made. It's more time-consuming and the screen often won't be useable again for months, but at least it'll be there when they need it next. That's the reality of screen printing at a smaller, boutique level.

"We are just trying to be a small, good quality, high-end type shop," says Ribeiro. "You know, nothing fancy—just trying to do the best quality work that we can." They print anywhere from five to 1,000 units per order for a company. While Ribeiro admits that it would be nice to "hire an extra hand or two" some time in the future, they don't have any plans for exceptional growth. Some times you have to sacrifice rapid expansion for the quality of an expertly hand-crafted product.



Funding for newcomers

New funding will help five organizations to deliver settlement services to an estimated 1,200 immigrants in Kitchener-Waterloo. Harold Albrecht, MP for Kitchener-Conestoga announced \$8.4 million in funding to help newcomers to Canada. He made the announcement on behalf of Diane Finley, minister of Citizenship and Immigration.

"The Government of Canada wants newcomers to succeed," said Albrecht. "This funding will give immigrants in Kitchener-Waterloo access to the support they need as they settle into our community. From language training to help finding a job, the five organizations we are supporting today deliver valuable services to newcomers. Their success is good for Kitchener-Waterloo and good for our country as a whole."

He noted that while immigration levels have increased for many years, settlement funding has not kept pace.

"Building strong communities now and in the future requires that we discover and maximize the skills potential of all who participate in the economy," said John Tibbitts, president, Conestoga College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning. "Conestoga strongly supports the efforts of many community groups towards this end, and we have forged productive partnerships with these groups, because we are all working towards the goal of community development combined with economic progress. The funding announced today by the Government of Canada is welcome news. It encourages all of us to press on with new, effective initiatives."

Through the Canada Ontario Immigration Agreement, the Canadian government has increased settlement funding for Ontario by a total of \$920 million over five years.

The 2008 federal budget also proposes changes to modernize the immigration system and to shorten the time it takes to bring newcomers and their families to Canada. Under the proposed system, immigrants with skills and experience needed in Canada would be processed more quickly. The federal government has said these changes give newcomers more opportunity to find work sooner, to provide a better life for themselves which would give them and their families a better life in Canada.

Critics of the plan worry that expediting applications based on Canada's labour needs will make it slower and more difficult for immigrants to bring family members into Canada.

Currently the Foreign Credentials Referral Office (FCRO) helps internationally trained individuals find the information they need to get their credentials assessed and recognized more quickly. The FCRO was established in 2007 to provide information, path-finding and referral services to help internationally trained individuals use their skills in Canada.

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