



Man of steel

Earl Hirtz

President, CWS Industries Corp.

Earl Hirtz, dressed casually in a blue collared shirt and beige pants, is strolling through the Langley construction plant of Lantec. His company, CWS Industries (Mfg) Corp., took over the place last year when it acquired Lantec's parent company, the Edmonton-based IMAC. He stops to show off a set of newly purchased automated machines that churn out massive steel cylinders, parts that are used in the construction of winches – Lantec's specialty.

"They're like big toys," the 50-year-old president gushes over the machines, as a couple of sweaty workers in blue overalls carefully handle the controls.

Hirtz, who was raised in Fort St. John, is in his element here. A former welder and metallurgic engineer with a diploma in material engineering from the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology in Edmonton, he knows a thing or two about manual work. Hirtz eventually topped up his diploma with a BA in business administration from SFU, and went on to work at SNC Lavalin and West Coast Engineering, where he was VP of international business. After a recent two-year spell at a New York-based dot-com venture, e-Steel, he's happy to be back in the land of tangible products.

"You build something, here it is, you can look at it, pick it up and feel it, which is much more in tune with my own personal desires and things I like to do," he explains, after a drive in his silver Volvo station

wagon to his headquarters at CWS, the heavy machinery attachment company he and three partners, Jason Kitamura, Colin Yakashiro and Robert Watson, bought in 2003.

Since Hirtz and his partners acquired CWS, its revenues have increased five-fold, and the company has grown rapidly. "When we bought [CWS], sales were about \$11.8 million, and they had three salespeople," he recalls. "We'll be close to \$75 million this year, and we've got around 23 salespeople." Altogether, CWS now has 400 employees and, says Hirtz, it currently has over 40 positions available. In fact, the sales team in Surrey has been relegated to a portable, because there's no more room for them in the main office building.

He gestures toward a set of framed black-and-white photos facing his desk that show a young man driving a large tractor; in one, he's accompanied by an infant. "That's my dad, and that's me," Hirtz says, beaming. His father ran a road construction business in Fort St. John while his mother, still going strong at 77, continues to sell real estate there. "She just had her best year ever," Hirtz says, laughing. He points at the bucket of the tractor in the photo. "This is what we build. Fifty years later, I'm back where I was when I was six months old."

With international sales primarily to forestry and oil and gas industries in the U.S., business at CWS is going well, despite the strong Canadian dollar. "I don't see any

end in sight," says Hirtz, chirpily. "We're capacity-constrained right now, to the point where our backlog now is more than our sales were when we bought the company. Our problem is just making it fast enough." Hence, the fancy new "toys" for the workers, and a focus on internal and external expansion that includes the spate of new hirings and some hush-hush acquisition plans.

What it all comes down to, says Hirtz, is the staff. "The whole thing depends on the people. If you don't do the people part right, the rest of it isn't going to work at all." Which is why his calendar is booked solid with meetings – the weekly management sessions at both local plants, plus conference calls to Edmonton, as well as a weekly "toolbox" meeting. "That's when we get all the employees from the shop together and we have a group hug, a huddle, and try to smoke out any issues and see where we need to improve, get the feedback from the shop floor," he explains. From the cheerful reception he gets from his employees – welders, engineers and salespeople – he seems to be a welcome presence, rather than the instigator of "here's the boss, act busy" reactions.

Asked whether he's pondering early retirement, Hirtz just chuckles. "Well, I'd like to wait for my mother to retire first, at least. It would look a little funny if I quit before she did."

– Jessica Werb