

# Continuous Training & Good Citizenship Lead to Success for Minneapolis Jobshop

A commitment to customers, employees and the community has been the basis for continuous growth for NiCo Plating, Minneapolis, MN. Denny Donaldson, president, says the company priorities have always been training for employees and involvement in the community to help improve the neighborhood where the shop is located. "This type of involvement helps our employees advance in their jobs and improve their personal skills," Donaldson said. "We not only offer work-related training, we even offer things such as conversational English, for employees who can use the training." The company has an extensive internal training program and also offers outside courses from other sources, such as AESF's Training Course in Electroplating & Surface Finishing.

NiCo leadership is also involved with community self-help programs for improving the environment and quality of life for residents. "Most of

our employees live here in the same neighborhood where they work," Donaldson said. "It's fitting for us to be involved with the local government in programs for improving the community." The Whittier Works program, named for the neighborhood, is a cooperative effort between local industry, local government and the citizens. The company pays the city an hourly rate per employee, then the City of Minneapolis pays the salary of a new employee for 60 days at a local business. This basically covers on-the-job training for the period, says Donaldson. If it works out, the trainee becomes a regular employee. "We've been a partner in the program for quite a while," said Donaldson, "and we have received a lot of good employees through it."



Jon Phillips, CEF, left, vice president of operations, and Dave Benik, CEF, plant manager, have been with NiCo for 24 and 25 years, respectively. Both started out as plating line operators.

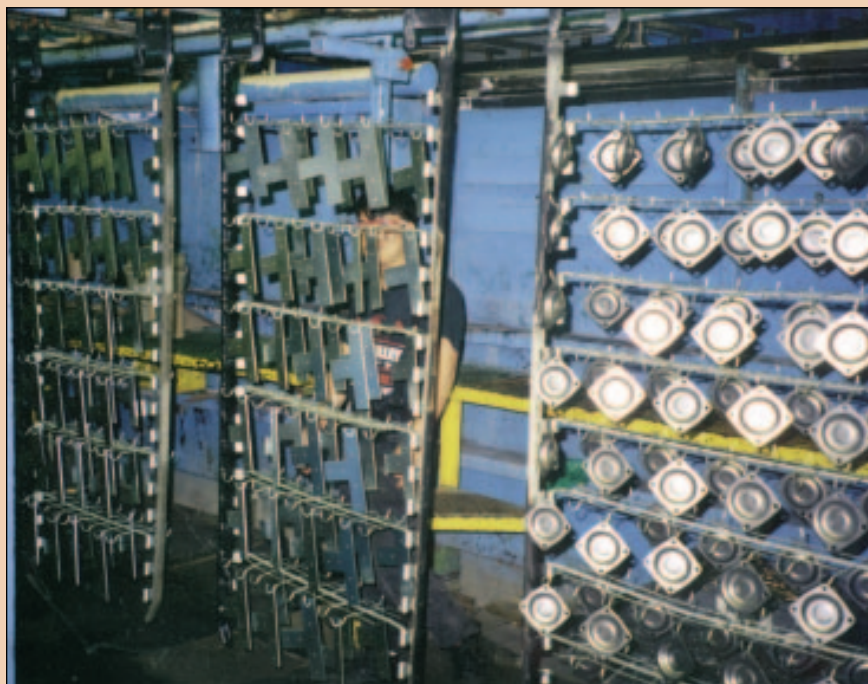
## Employee Advancement

The emphasis on training has produced good results. The company has 120 employees and 35 of them are Certified Electroplater-Finishers (CEFs). That's a high ratio for any shop, and many of the employees who previously earned the CEF designation are now in management positions at NiCo and other plating shops. "That's a good part of this business," said Donaldson. "We've been fortunate to see many people who got their start here grow and become more confident and skillful. When they succeed, we succeed. It's helping to keep industry standards high and it all comes back to us, eventually."

All employees receive regularly scheduled training in a variety of work-related activities, such as confined space entry, hazardous waste handling, fork lift training, and the "Right-to-Know" Act. Regular training sessions, daily supervisory meetings and weekly production meetings are held to keep communication lines open. A continuous effort is made to keep all employees up-to-date with the latest technology and industry trends.

## Process Lines

NiCo has three automatic zinc lines, one manual hoist zinc line, four copper-nickel-chromium rack lines, and one cadmium rack/barrel line.



NiCo designs special racks in house for plating a high volume of parts for customers.



*The NiCo facility features automatic, hoist and hand rack plating lines. In the foreground is one of the zinc hoist lines.*

The automatic lines are used for rack plating clear, yellow and black chromates. Jon Phillips, CEF, vice president of operations, said the lines are designed for flexibility and processes can be customized according to customer needs. Customers can choose from a number of affordable options, depending on the needs and intended use of the parts, he said. The shop also has one tin process line and the capability to install another. A variety of finishes are offered, including zinc, copper, nickel, chromium, cadmium, passivation of stainless steel and zinc phosphate. Parts are processed for several different industries, including computers, electronics and heavy machinery. A number of customers are Fortune 500 companies.

#### Service & Quality Assurance

Phillips said the company tries to do everything possible in-house to provide better service for its customers. A fully staffed machine shop completes most repairs on-site, and even designs and manufactures most of the plating racks for the company. Specialized racking and precision

tooling can be expensive and take a long time to get from outside sources, said Phillips. NiCo keeps a large inventory of fixtures, and it has the ability to design and build racks in-house. "The majority of our repairs and new designs are completed here in the shop," Phillips said. "That gives us an advantage for getting things done faster and better for our customers."

The shop's technical staff includes a quality control manager who oversees the entire plating process, using modern, computerized testing equipment. A quality assurance report routinely accompanies each order that leaves the plant, showing customers the

tests performed and the results. Staff chemists make sure that plating solutions are constantly tested and analyzed.

#### Waste Treatment

Wastewater from the plating lines is processed to filter out the metals. The liquid is diluted and treated by ion



*Plated parts undergo a number of tests for quality assurance. Here a NiCo employee uses the company's computer network to enter analytical data.*



exchange. Canisters containing the heavy metals are sent to a local recovery facility\* where the metals are removed and sold to smelters and other users. The concentrated waste contains hydrochloric acid, cleaners, chromates and cyanide. These concentrates are also shipped off-site for waste treatment. NiCo buys the distilled hydrochloric acid back from the recovery facility for reuse. Waste treatment has recently been expanded with new holding tanks and additional equipment for processing. The facility has the capacity to handle waste treatment from additional plating lines that may be added in the future.

#### Company Expansion

NiCo is owned by Bill Teubert, Kirk Lindgren and Donald Rhodes. What the owners started as a small plating operation in the basement of a barber shop less than 25 years ago is now an 80,000 ft<sup>2</sup> facility. The company has completed two expansions during the past six years and has room for plenty of additional growth within the expanded facility. Phillips coordinated the latest expansion, which took nearly three years to complete and

almost doubled the production area of the plant. Improvements were made to a number of functions, including an expanded air handling system throughout the shop and on all lines. The system is designed with exhaust ducts placed on all process lines to remove undesirable air, while adding

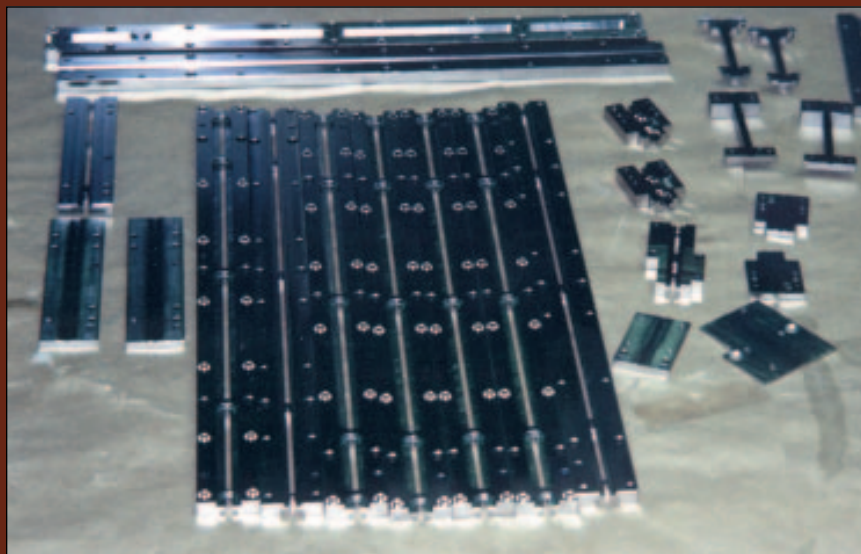
fresh air at the same rate of flow in other selected entry areas. The system is providing a work atmosphere that exceeds regulatory requirements. The expansion was also designed to accommodate new process lines throughout. Major support columns have been strategically located in preparation for the addition of automatic or hoist plating lines.

In addition to the expansion, NiCo owners have acquired two sister organizations in recent years. Avtec Finishing Systems, Inc., only a short distance away, is involved in a number of joint ventures with NiCo. Avtec specializes in anodizing and electroless nickel processes. Lindgren and Teubert also own MetCo Metal Finishing, Phoenix, AZ, a plating company that features many of the same services as NiCo. Both sister organizations are currently in the process of expanding operations.

#### The Future for NiCo

More growth is already on the drawing board for the company, according to Phillips. "We have continued to expand through the years to keep up with customer demand, and that's the approach we will take in the future," he said. "As long as there is more demand for our services, there will be more growth." *P&SF*

*\*U.S. Filter, Minneapolis, MN*



*A sample of metal parts processed at NiCo. The company services computer, electronics and heavy machinery industries.*