



As Seen In
EDM TODAY



Sko-Die Facility, Morton Grove, Illinois

▷ BY JOE BALLEK

Tool & Die Excellence for 77 Years

Sko-Die has been led by three generations of the Steining family since 1947. Their journey started as a classic American success story but has transformed into something greater. It is the tale of multiple generations upholding the founder's core principles to build something extraordinary.

Sko-Die has manufactured heavy-gauge metal stampings and custom steel laminations since 1947. The company was founded by Joseph Steining and two partners. In the 1970s, Joseph bought out the partners' interests and became sole owner.

Born in St. Louis as the son of a Hungarian immigrant, Joseph moved to the Chicago area. He became a tool & die maker and worked for several different shops, honing his skills as a die maker. Over the years, Joseph made many industry connections. He saw that the Chicago area was a hotbed for tool & die work. He also saw opportunity, and with an entrepreneurial spirit and with confidence in his abilities as a toolmaker, he decided to try his hand as a business owner.

Sko-Die started with a small 2500 sq ft building in Morton Grove, Illinois. Under Joseph Steining's leadership, the business experienced steady growth. Those who knew him recall that he was an excellent listener. When meeting with prospective customers, he gave them a chance to tell him what they wanted rather than go on and on with a sales pitch.



*Patrick Steining
President, Sko-Die, Inc.*

Around 1957, Joseph's son Dick Steining joined the company. Ultimately, Dick assumed the reigns of Sko-Die as President. Dick ran the company until his retirement in 2002. At that time, Dick's son Patrick Steining assumed the role of President and is still currently running the company.

EDM Today had the opportunity to visit with Patrick to learn some of their secrets to success. Patrick explained that ever since his grandfather Joseph started the company, they have fostered two core principles: taking care of the employees and taking care of the customers. Those fundamental principles have not wavered since the company was founded in 1947 and have been passed down through the generations.

Patrick credits their longevity and growth to a strategic plan to seek out customers from a diverse group of industries. Their work today includes aerospace, powergen, industrial, medical, consumer products, and energy. They differentiate powergen from energy in that powergen applies to the creation of energy such as wind power and hydroelectric. Energy is considered as parts that go into motors, such as laminations. An example of consumer products is blade blanks for hair trimmers.



One of Sko-Die's Manufacturing Bays



Sko-Die Automated Workcell

While touring the Sko-Die facility, it was obvious that they were investing significantly in automation. Patrick explained that the investment started in 2018 when he saw automation used at an industry event. He learned how it could use less floor space and achieve a 2X production rate increase compared to human manufacturing.

Patrick proudly said it was a good decision. Adding automation has allowed them to ship more products faster and consume fewer resources. An additional benefit has been that, depending on the job, it will enable them to quote more competitively, thereby bringing in more work.

Military applications are another industry that Sko-Die does well in. Patrick was pleased that a project for B-52 bomber parts had just been renewed for another 25 years.

Sko-Die is still in the same building that Joseph Steininger started in back in 1947. However, that building has been expanded many times over and now contains approximately 75,000 sq ft of manufacturing space. But even with the expansions, floor space is becoming a premium commodity.

In discussing automation with Patrick, it was clear that the idea is not to reduce the workforce. It is just the opposite. Automation is great for certain tasks but cannot completely replace skilled toolmakers. More than anything, it unburdens the toolmakers from certain repetitive tasks and allows them to devote their energies to other important work. The increased production rates of the automation-assisted toolmakers increase the company's competitiveness and ultimately lead to more employment—not less.

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When discussing the nation's lack of skilled workers, Patrick indicated that, unfortunately, the Chicago area is no exception to labor shortages. However, Sko-Die is fortunate because it is a great workplace. Employees can build a career and have a nice lifestyle for themselves and their families. Potential new hires generally like what they see and hear when visiting the Sko-Die facility. They like the apprenticeship program and great compensation package that includes health care insurance with a significant percentage of the cost paid for by Sko-Die.

Hiring and training employees is, of course, extremely important, but employee retention is also something that some companies struggle with. Sko-Die uses a very effective two-part bonus structure. At the end of the year, employees get a bonus based on their individual performance, but also a second bonus based on the company's aggregate performance. This inspires employees to work as a team and support each other. It is certainly a strategy that works for Sko-Die as they are fortunate to have little turnover of employees.

Sko-Die was nominated for Top Shop honors by Neal Otten from Carl Hirschmann. In addition to adding automation, Sko-Die has embraced high-accuracy fixturing. Sko-Die's Senior Manufacturing Engineer Tony Cosentino said they started with Carl Hirschmann fixtures and vices in the early 2000s. They allow the operators to set up faster and greatly reduce errors. Most importantly, they enable Sko-Die to achieve extremely high repeatability and precision in their most demanding work.

Tony added that, indirectly, the investment in Carl Hirschmann tooling and fixturing has helped Sko-Die grow as it allows them to be competitive and achieve an accuracy level that exceeds the customer's expectations.



EDM Today asked Patrick about the investment in their latest EDM, the Sodick AL600P. Patrick stated that their Wire EDM operations are critical to their overall success. They wanted to choose a machine that would meet their requirements from both a productivity and accuracy standpoint. They looked closely at Sodick and ran test cuts. The speed, accuracy, and surface finish all exceeded their expectations, so they made the investment. Tony added that it was a good decision. Their Sodick machine has performed extremely well, and Sodick has provided great service and support.

Sko-Die is an active member of several industry associations; their memberships include the Precision Metalforming Association, the American Welding Society, the National Association of Manufacturers, and the Illinois Manufacturers' Association. Patrick explained that their active memberships help to keep them abreast of new technologies and issues that impact their industry. He added that the information gleaned from their industry associations help greatly with their strategic planning.



Tony Cosentino and EDM Operator Wojciech Karpiesiuk

EDM Today asked Patrick what's next for Sko-Die. What are the short and long-term goals? Patrick hesitated briefly to consider the question and replied that the short-term goal is to increase the use of automation. This will continue to spur growth. The long-term goal is to increase output and sales to maintain a growth rate of 8% per year. That is a comfortable rate at which Sko-Die can continue to grow while still holding exacting tolerances and meeting delivery schedules.

The future of Sko-Die will also involve the fourth generation of Steiningers taking a more active role. In 2014, Patrick's son Kyle joined the company. He is currently a production planner and learning about the business. The fast-paced advancement of technology is making it increasingly difficult for each new generation in various aspects. The business has grown significantly since the early 1940s under the leadership of founder Joseph Steininger. Today, the company is much more of a complete solution to its customers. It can design and build the tooling, run prototype parts, and even handle full production running the tool.



Patrick and Kyle Steininger

EDM Today asked Patrick what else he would like the readers to know about Sko-Die. He stated that he always welcomes the chance to quote new work. He hopes that EDM Today readers who are not familiar with Sko-Die will visit their website – <http://www.sko-die.com>



Lockheed P-2 Neptune Aircraft and Crew

[Editor's note: Normally, this would end the feature. However, during my visit with Sko-Die, I became aware of a small world story that is worth sharing. When Neal Otten of Carl Hirschmann visited Sko-Die for the first time and met Patrick, they thought each looked familiar. They realized that they had met each other as children through a connection with their fathers. It turns out that their fathers were in the Navy together, and both were part of the same crew on a Lockheed P-2 Neptune aircraft. Neal's father is the second from the right side. Neal suspects that Patrick's father is taking the photo. The P-2 Neptune was a maritime patrol and anti-submarine warfare aircraft.]

