

Growth by DESIGN



Strategy and hard work a winning combination for growing job shop

BY MARY SCIANNA

Just The Facts

**Universe Machine Corp.,
Edmonton, ON**

years in business: 52

size: 9,941 sq m (107,000 sq ft)

services: Machining,
millwrighting, repair, specialized
product manufacturing

machine types: Multi-tasking,
five axis, turning, milling

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Kurt Feigel Senior learned to work hard and to work smart at the early age of 18 to obtain journeyman machinist accreditation in Germany.

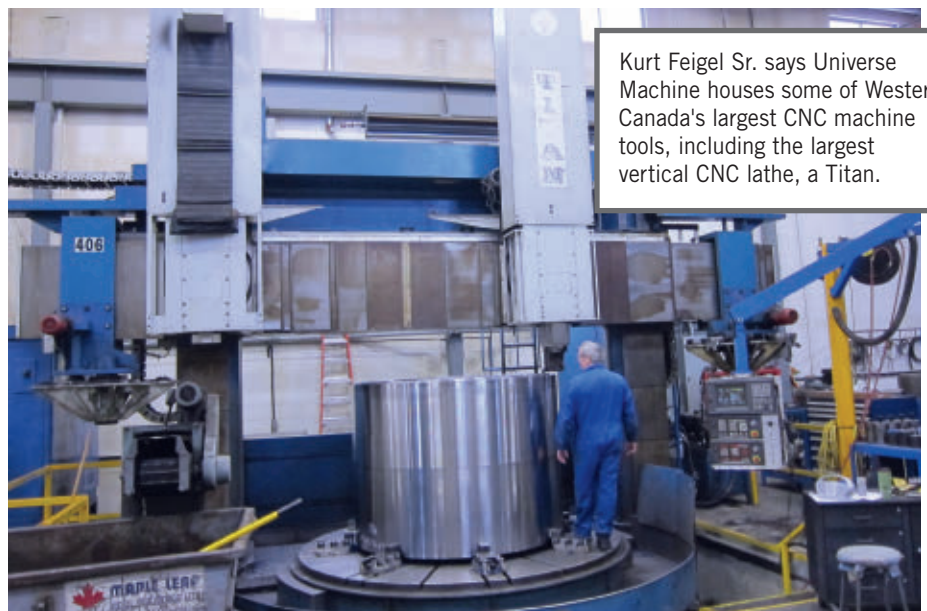
His perseverance has paid off. Today, with help from his sons Kurt Junior and David and daughter Connie, the now 75-year-old grandfather to 10 and great grandfather to one, operates a flourishing 52-year-old machine shop in Edmonton, ON, Universe Machine Corp., as well as several other manufacturing businesses under a separate business entity, Feigel Enterprises.

It wasn't always such a flourishing business, but Feigel has learned to manage the economic ebbs and flows of the Canadian marketplace by adjusting his vision and his business when required.

"At one point we reached 175 employees but with the downturn in the economy and the drop in oil pricing, we're now down to about 117 people," says Feigel. "The biggest challenge in our business is to be able to adjust to the times. When things are booming and there's lots of work, you make money. But when the economy changes, and we're in that downturn now, you need to be able to adjust, cut personnel and do things differently to survive rough times. We've done a fairly good job over the years and I can proudly say in 52 years of being in business, we haven't had a losing year yet."



Three generations: From left is Kurt Feigel Sr., son Kurt Feigel and grandson Konrad Feigel.



Kurt Feigel Sr. says Universe Machine houses some of Western Canada's largest CNC machine tools, including the largest vertical CNC lathe, a Titan.

Feigel was only 23 when he and two partners opened a 186 sq m (2,000 sq ft) shop in Edmonton in 1965. By 1977, Feigel was the sole owner of the 14-employee business. Today, Kurt Jr runs Universe Machine and his son David and daughter Corinne run Feigel Investments, which consists of a number of businesses, including a tooling company that supplies tools to the machine shop and a second machine shop that specializes in small part machining, Saturn Machine Works.

“My goal has always been to find partners or buy businesses that would supply machining work to our shop. So

we created Saturn Machine Works to concentrate on machining of small parts because Universe Machine focuses on large part machining,” explains Feigel.

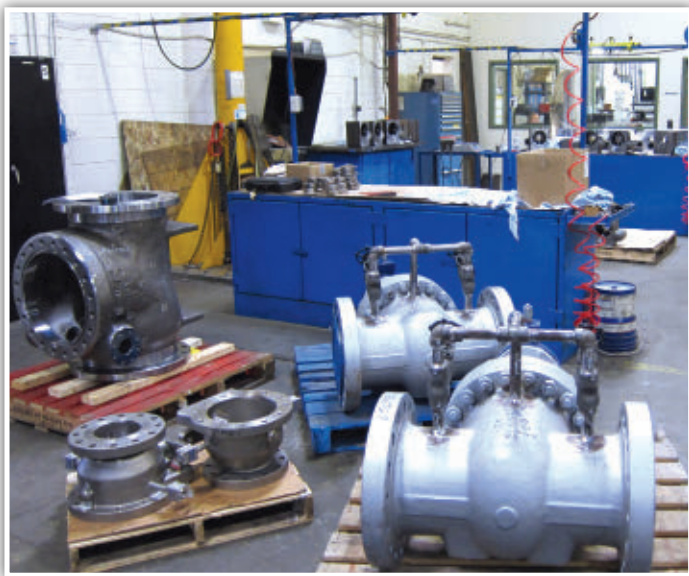
Indeed, Universe Machine boasts a number of large machine tools, including what Feigel says is the largest vertical CNC lathe in Western Canada, a Titan, and the largest Mitsubishi horizontal CNC boring mill. The large part machining operation also includes other vertical and horizontal boring mills, multi-tasking, five axis and other machining centres.

Universe Machine is not just a general machine shop, although it

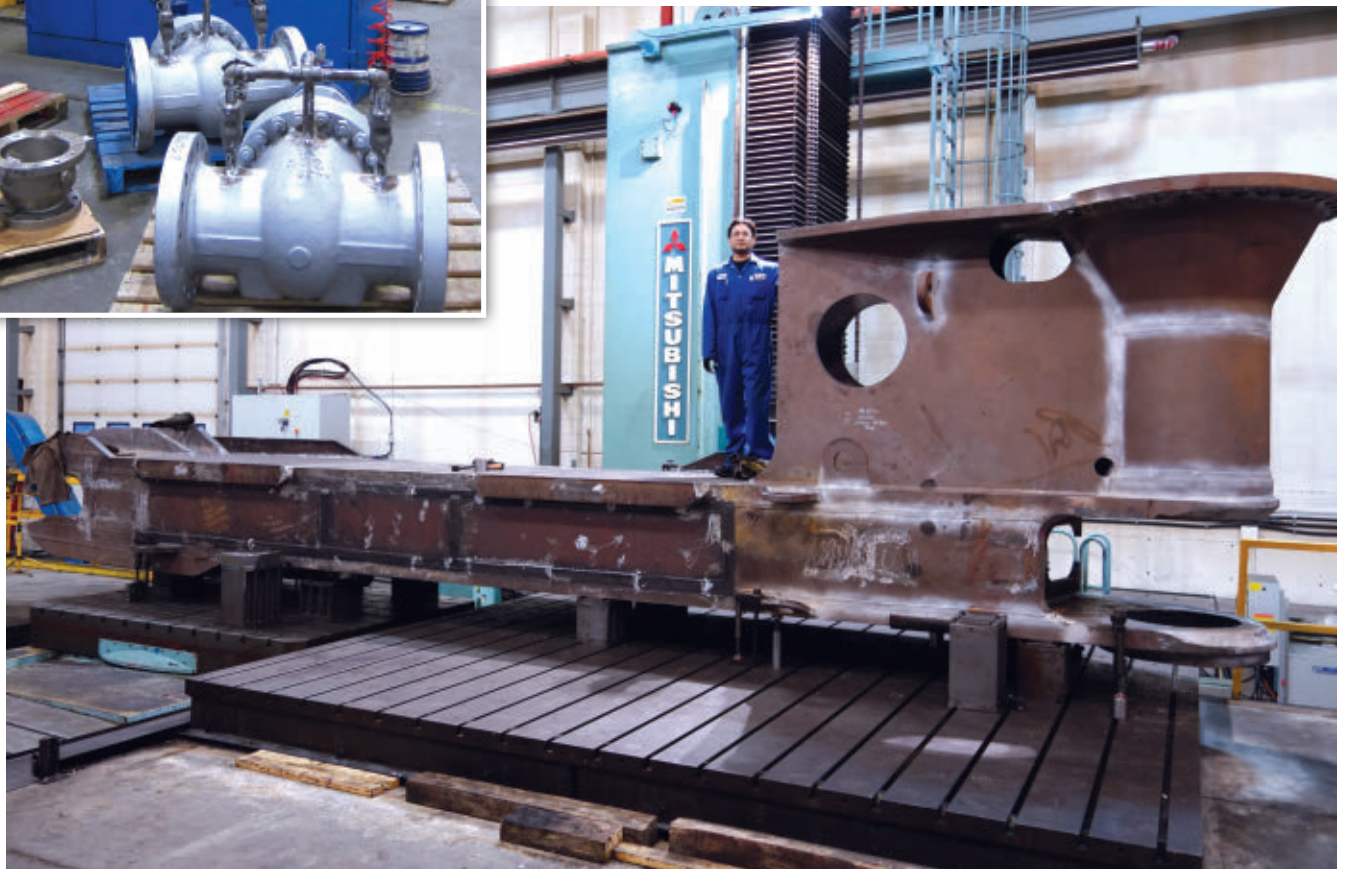
generates a significant portion of its business from servicing the oil and gas and construction markets in Western Canada. The shop also manufactures some of its own products used in the oil and gas industry throughout North America. The products include hydraulic test stands and hydraulic power tongs. The materials are made from steel and while the majority of its work is with steel, the shop does machine Inconel and stainless steel parts.

To ensure the shop remains competitive, Feigel invests regularly in machinery updates, but it’s now always new machine purchases.

“We update our shop in two ways. With large equipment, we first look at retrofit but with the smaller machines, we just replace them because it’s very important to have good equipment. At the moment, we have what we need but in the future we’ll adjust to the type of



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work that we have and buy equipment if we need it. I always believed that you buy the best equipment right from the start to do the best job for the work.”

A side benefit of operating updated equipment is having a shop that people want to work in, adds Feigel. Indeed, while many shops are grappling with a skilled trades shortage, Universe Machine has many long-term employees, including approximately 20 who have been with the company 25 years.

“We have some third generation employees. I think the main way to keep people is to offer fair wages and ensure it’s always on the upper end. We also treat people right and make them feel that they’re part of our family. We’re not just a machine shop; we’re a big family. My motto is to treat



Universe Machine's 9,941 sq m (107,000 sq ft) operation boasts some of the latest in CNC machine tools including some of the largest machines in Western Canada.

others the way you want to be treated and a lot of people say this but you need to actually do it for it to work.”

Perhaps the most important part of Feigel’s success comes from a simple fact; he enjoys what he does and it’s advice he’s passed on to his grandchildren,

including two who are now engineers and work in the business.

“I say to my children and grandchildren, go into a field you love, not where the big bucks are. If you have a passion for something, you’ll be good at and the money will come from that.” **SMT**