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News

Century Labs thinks new location measures up

Company calibrates highly sensitive equipment

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A lot of equipment and manufacturing processes require precise controls for optimal results. So much depends on the accuracy of test equipment these businesses use that they need to calibrate it regularly.

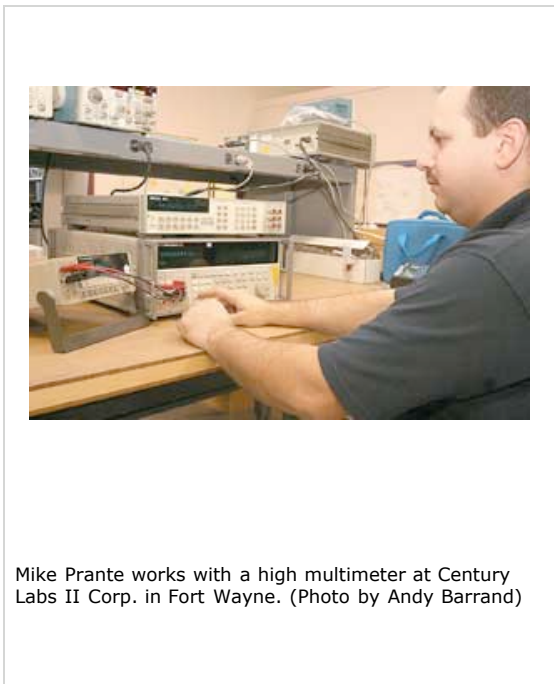
Technicians at Fort Wayne-based Century Labs II Corp. have been providing test equipment calibration and repair services for more than 25 years to aerospace companies, defense contractors and commercial manufacturers.

They also have extensive experience providing testing and repair services for temperature equipment, including ovens, chambers, thermocouples and infrared cameras, and for other industrial equipment, including high-voltage sparkers and anodizers.

Over the years, Century Labs has grown its customer base by cultivating a reputation for responding quickly to customer needs and by keeping pace with advances in technology and quality-control standards. A recent relocation has given it space to accommodate that growth.

The company has almost completed the renovation of a medical office building it moved into a few weeks ago at 3120 Independence Drive. The building provides more than twice the space the company had occupied at a facility on Congressional Parkway.

At its previous location, "we were just packed; now that we've got 7,500 square feet, we're more efficient, better organized and have room to move around in," said Jeff Underwood, president. It also has room for future growth.



Mike Prante works with a high multimeter at Century Labs II Corp. in Fort Wayne. (Photo by Andy Barrand)

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Century Labs was founded in 1992 by two partners who have left the company, Robin Bork, its quality assurance manager, and Larry Beber, who had worked with Bork and Underwood during the 1980s at a General Electric Co. equipment calibration operation.

As a sales representative for the GE business, Beber had close contact with its customers and grew frustrated there when he wasn't able to serve some of them to his satisfaction.

He found a Fort Wayne machining business willing to add calibration to its services and take on customers who had grown dissatisfied with GE, so he and Bork joined it for a time until they decided it also lacked sufficient commitment to customer service.

Beber was a partner in Century Labs until he decided to retire about three years ago. Bork and Underwood, who each now own half the company, eventually brought him back on a part-time basis to work in sales on Mondays and Tuesdays.

Executives estimate the company has averaged at least 5 percent annual growth, and they said Century Labs recently extended its services to cover equipment that provides pressure-level readings and accelerometers, which measure the distance of vibration movement.

Demand for calibration services increased during the 1990s as a result of the quality movement, which transformed manufacturing for suppliers to the auto industry or international customers.

The movement made it virtually impossible to do business with major auto manufacturers or customers in Europe or Asia without documenting and certifying that every step of production, inspection and shipment complied with detailed international quality standards.

And quality program participation soon became required of any company doing business with these suppliers.

Quality program certification wasn't possible without a great deal of data collection, including a lot of precise measurement. Century Labs' business increased as it helped industry in Indiana and surrounding states comply with the new standards.

The movement also required the company to comply with new standards.

"We're audited by third-party organizations," Bork said. "They test you on your ability to do the things you say you can do, and make sure the product going out the door, the service we provide, meets accredited standards. We have to put on our (calibration) certificate what procedure we used."

The company serves more than 900 customers and helps them maintain the accuracy of more than 15,000 pieces of equipment, accomplishing much of that through regularly scheduled calibration.

About 40 percent of its work is done at its shop, and the rest is done at customer sites. As its business continues to grow, "we would like for that to be more 50-50," Underwood said.

All of the technicians at Century Labs have at least an associate degree in electrical engineering, and it does testing and repair work for major manufacturers and a number of well-known names in test equipment, such as Fluke, Tektronix, Hewlett Packard and Valhalla.

But, "our strength is in our small customers," Underwood said.

"I think that's why we have so many of them."

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