

## MANUFACTURERS

### JRB Studio

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By Rob Kirkbride



**T**he company formerly known as Baker Manufacturing, a Pineville, La. firm that now markets to the industry under the JRB Studio banner, is best known for its height adjustable tables. But even more impressive than the products that come out of the small company, might be its relationship with its employees.

The office furniture maker, which is dwarfed by the large firms in the industry, currently has 11 employees with more than 25 years of service to the company. In addition, within the last 10 years, JRB Studio has had three people retire who have had more than 25 years in. Two of those retirees spent 47 and 49 years respectively with the company.

In a society where the term “corporate longevity” is an oxymoron, JRB Studio seems to be bucking the trend. Maybe it is the company’s small town roots and values -- JRB is in a Louisiana town with a population of 14,000 located right in the middle of the state. Or maybe it stems from the company’s history. Jim Baker founded the company in 1954 after he could not find another job in his hometown.

Regardless of the reason, JRB Studio is an anomaly in a world that seems to value labor on the cheap and loyalty as far as the next paycheck. It is not just the longevity that is remarkable, but the upward mobility of the workforce as well.

The best example of both might just be Roger Arnold, JRB Studio’s senior engineer and director of product development. On Nov. 15 he celebrated his 30 year anniversary with the company. He started with Baker right out of high school, an 18-year-old who took a job as a woodworker.

Since he walked into the company as a factory worker sporting a Rush concert t-shirt, Arnold has been promoted 11 times, most recently in March 2011 when he took his current position, which oversees all engineering and product development at the company. Over the years, he has worked as a machine operator, project specialist, engineering technician, manufacturing engineer, then manager of product engineer, research and development manager and engineering manager before becoming senior engineer and director of product development.

“I started shortly after I got out of high school,” said Arnold, who prefers problem solving to press interviews. “I didn’t want to leave the area to go to college. So I got on here at Baker and I started in the wood shop laying up laminated particle board panels back in 1982. Then we started doing sheet metal work. I got in on the ground floor in that and learned the sheet metal forming business. I went into doing prototypes and model making (and in the mid-1980s) I got married and my wife was from the area, so I really wanted to stay here.

“Moving to different things in the company was great for me. There was always something new and exciting to learn and over the years, I have had a series of great teachers and mentors.”

In addition to his mentors in the company, Arnold praised Tom Newhouse, the Grand Rapids-based designer who has worked on many of JRB Studio’s latest products. “It has been wonderful for our company to connect with Tom. Tom is always thinking ahead and is so innovative,” he said.

Newhouse feels the same way about Arnold. He said Arnold has one of the best engineering minds he has ever come across. Since Arnold was not formally trained as an engineer and worked his way up through the ranks, he looks at projects for many different angles.

“Coming up that way definitely has advantages,” Arnold said. “I have all the “hands-on” experience since I spent time doing woodworking in the wood shop. I’ve run the machines. I’ve done the actual work, then the model building and that is a good background too. I’ve got a small crew so we all have to wear a lot of hats and do a lot of different things. I was a hands on guy first and I still am.”

He has an eye for how a product is made, a point of view honed from the factory floor to the drafting board. He calls himself a “nuts and bolts kind of guy.” Chief Executive Officer Charles Martin is pleased to have him in charge.

“One thing Roger is humble on is that he is overseeing not only design with Tom, but engineering and pre-production as well,” Martin said. “To put all that in one person’s hands is rare to be able to do. This way, you don’t have design doing one thing and engineering trying to figure out what they are doing. That really helps with our speed to market.”

Arnold said Baker has always felt like a family-oriented company. He has worked alongside three generations of the family and said there is a genuine commitment to employees coming from the company. “That means a lot,” he said. “There is direct communication with office people and owners and people on the floor. I think (the employees) would all say the same thing. There’s just a good family atmosphere here at Baker. Being a small company, everybody gets to see more of the big picture and be involved in it.”

While Arnold has spent the last 30 years soaking up knowledge from his mentors, now that he is one of the senior employees at the company, he finds himself increasingly giving back that information to his younger workers.

He’s only 48 years old and hasn’t thought a lot about retiring just yet. Arnold said he would like to stay and see the company continue to grow and put products out in the market that are the “best they can be.”

Some executives tout speed to market (which JRB Studio also has) and excellent design (which JRB Studio also has) as their greatest assets. Martin said the company’s strong, stable workforce is his company’s greatest gift. “All that experience goes into the products for our customers,” he said. 

