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Saturday, September 27, 2008

## News & Features

### Baker Electric lights up a productive trend

BY KENT DARR

Dave Washington spends his workdays pondering pigtails and whips, not to mention offsets, saddles and kicks.

Those words are just plain English to an electrician, or, in Washington's case, the foreman of one of the few manufacturing operations in the United States where all the components that light up and feed power to commercial buildings arrive at job sites ready to install.

For the last three years, Baker Electric Inc. has operated a factory and warehouse in a 100,000-square-foot building at 2301 Fleur Drive.

Washington oversees the operation and with right-hand-man Danny Dowell conjures up ways to save the company some money.

That means rigging a mechanical pipe bender - which imparts those saddles and kicks to metal conduit - from what amounts to an electric motor and a hefty piece of iron. Or fashioning what at first blush appears to be a large pencil sharpener into a tool that cuts and strips cables.

"You can tell that we're farm kids," Washington said.

The factory was established after Baker Electric CEO Britt Baker attended a convention in Las Vegas and learned that two electrical contractors prefabricated the circuit boxes, conduit and other fixtures that were going into casinos and hotels.

Despite having little more than that information to work from, Baker Electric decided the approach would work for its projects, which in recent years have

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*Ty Dudley, left, and Adam Lyons assemble a wire mold at Baker Electric Inc.'s prefabrication factory. The company saves 10 to 15 percent on labor costs per job by manufacturing and assembling components at the shop. Photo by Duane Tinkey*

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ranged from the Allied Insurance expansion downtown to the Court Avenue streetscape project.

Washington and Dowell were pulled off their jobs as field electricians to get the factory up and running.

In addition to pipe benders, wire strippers, crimpers and other specialty tools, the duo also built fabrication tables and redesigned the temporary power supplies that deliver electricity to construction crews on a job site.

Washington meets with a Baker Electric project manager before the start of each job to determine what's needed: everything from the quantity and type of electrical wire to the number of outlets, lights and switches, ground wires, assembled bundles of wire that will run between outlets - those are the whips that Washington ponders - even the number of bends and brackets needed to snake and attach conduit at a site.

One recent job where the factory came in handy was powering up a mail-processing center for Pitney Bowes PSI in a 78,000-square-foot building in Meredith Office Park in Urbandale.

The warehouse building was a shell that required electric service for the processing center and offices. Pitney Bowes announced in late August that it would move into the site, creating 70 jobs, and that it planned to be open for business by Oct. 1.

"That made it a six-week job, start to finish," said John Irving, Baker Electric's director of business development. "We had one crew working in the factory and another crew working on site toward the finish line."

Welding, sheet metal work and conduit bending were done at the factory, as was the assembly of equipment-control stands and racks that would route the conduit, Irving said.

Irving said the company lowers labor costs by 10 to 15 percent on each job by fabricating and assembling electrical components at the factory rather on an as-needed basis at the job site.

"Every day and every project is different, so everybody gets together and tries to figure out a way that this job can be done, whether we're doing a hotel or an office building or a restaurant," he said.

The factory employs up to 12 people out of a Baker work force of more than 400. Electrical apprentices do a rotation in the factory, where they can learn some aspects of the trade in a controlled setting.

"The value of pre-building offsite is threefold," said Russ Lewton, senior vice president of Weitz Iowa. "The controlled shop fabrication environment increases quality; the project schedule is accelerated because of reduced on-site labor; and there are greater cost efficiencies because the shop

fabrication is typically more efficient than field fabrication."

And there is the value of having a couple of "farm kids" using anything at hand, such as the hardened steel of a lawn edger used to cut smooth edges on conduit, just to save time and money.

"We'll build anything you can think of," Washington said. "You just have to use your imagination."

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