

Business Profile—



Aerospace Contacts operates 7 Citizen Cincom R04 VI model screw machines, equipped with LNS Tryton automated bar feeders. The machines run 24/7 including 4 hours a day lights out. The company runs two full-time and one half-time shift. Operator in photo is Dick Waters, machine shop supervisor.

All About Contacts

***How Loyal Customers Helped
a Poland-born Entrepreneur
Achieve Success in America..***

Story and photos by C. H. Bush, editor

You've probably heard the old cliché. You know, the one that says, "It's not *what* you know, but *who* you know that counts." And, if you don't believe that, try this. Surveys show that roughly one-half of all job seekers eventually find work through someone they know.

But, as true as *that* cliché might often be, in some circumstances it can be turned upside down and still be true. For instance, it sometimes can be said, "It's not *who* you know, but *what* you know that counts."

Which, in fact, was the case with Slawomir (Sal) Kielbus, a Polish immigrant who came to the U.S. on "lucky Friday 13", in September 1985 seeking employment and who in 1999 founded Tempe, AZ's very successful Aerospace Contacts LLC.

"Actually, I was supposed to be a rich and famous soccer player," Kielbus says jokingly. "Unfortunately that didn't work out, but luckily in Poland I had gone through technical school where I learned to run turning centers, lathes, mills, grinders, you name it. Also, I had experience working as a designer and draftsman in Poland, and so when I came to America, I already I had a very good knowledge of



Aerospace Contacts president, Slawomir (Sal) Kielbus (left), discusses insertion force QC requirement with Bob Melling, Plant Manager. The company produces hundreds of thousands of mil-spec contacts annually. Insertion force of finished connectors using their contacts is critical, requiring all contacts to meet stringent specifications.

machining and machine tools.”

Kielbus’ knowledge was good enough that within a month after arrival in the U.S. he landed a job at Arizona Electrical Products, an electronic connector manufacturer.

“I started as an operator on screw machines,” he recalls. “But after about five or six years I was put in charge of the whole shop. The company manufactured circular connectors for people like Honeywell and Allied Signal, so they had CNC screw machines and some turning centers, which I learned to run. That’s how I got into the connector industry. Not too long after that I was also put in charge of the assembly operations, and I got involved in quoting the jobs and negotiating contracts. Overall, I learned how to design connectors and contacts, and how to run the company, which has been a big help to me since I started my own business. I worked there for 12 years.”

Customers Track Him Down

After twelve years with Arizona Electrical Products, Kielbus was hired away by Jerrik Connecting Devices

“They wanted me to start a new division for them across the street from where I am now,” he says, “which I did. I went to the Westec show and negotiated to buy eight screw machines and set up their facility. The problem was that after a year they wanted to move me to another division in Connecticut. I didn’t want to go, so I left the company and went to work to run the shop for someone else, a shop making parts for carburetors.”

About 4 months after taking on the new job Kielbus’ old customers from his days at Arizona Electrical Products began tracking him down.

“I was surprised,” he says. “They wanted me to make contacts for them. I guess they liked what I knew about connectors and what I knew about how to make contacts that work right. The problem was, I was working for a company that didn’t make contacts and I didn’t have any

equipment of my own.”

One of the old customers who tracked down Kielbus solved his equipment problem in a surprising way.

“I had this customer who came to me and wanted me to make contacts for him,” Kielbus says. “I told him I didn’t work for that company any more and that he should go see them. He said he wanted me to do the contacts for him. He asked, ‘What would it take to get you to do my work?’ I said, ‘Well, I would need a contract for \$100,000.’ He

just said, ‘Oh, okay’ and gave me a contract. I was half joking, but he wasn’t. I used that contract to finance my first machine.”

After that Kielbus found himself caught up in a fast-growing business whirlwind.

Kielbus: “What I did was go ask my boss if I could rent some space from him and put in one of those Swiss automatics behind his machines. He agreed and then I got so busy, I had to put in another one. I told my boss that he should go back into the connector business, but he was happy doing what he was doing. He had a contract to make a million carburetor parts, so that was understandable. In September 1999 I formally created Aerospace Contacts LLC and I got my first machine in October.”

Customers Force Him Into Business

As soon as his other old customers heard Kielbus had a machine and was in business, they started coming to him, asking him to make contacts for them.

“They said, ‘Wow, Sal, you lied to us. You said you weren’t going to make contacts, but now you are. Now you have to make them for us.’ I said, ‘Well, my customer doesn’t have his drawings ready yet, so okay.’ That started it and in two months I was swamped with work and out of capacity. So after three months, I bought another machine.”

According to Kielbus, his boss wasn’t too happy about what was going on, but didn’t make trouble for him.

“He was very flexible and a good man,” Kielbus says. “He saw what was going on, but he said he didn’t want to lose me. In those days I was programming and running his machines, which didn’t need much tending. So, he let me put a second machine in his shop, but with my business taking off, I felt it was unfair to him for me to spend so much personal time on the phone. At that point I suggested that I work for him part time and that he should hire some operators and let me do the programming. He agreed.



Screw machine operator Jessie Bright sets up one of Aerospace Contacts' 7 Cincom R04 series machines. The machines operate 24/7, with 4 hours of lights-out running daily.

Eventually, though, that became impossible, too, so he hired a new supervisor and I moved to my own facility.”

All About Contacts

Growth at Aerospace Contacts has been astonishing, even to Kielbus, but, if you ask him, he knows why he has been so successful.

“It’s all about contacts and the niche market we serve,” he says. “We specialize in producing contacts in volumes up to about 25,000 contacts. My expertise is in quickly producing and delivering high quality contacts in quantities larger companies don’t want to consider. People come to me with an order and I deliver in two weeks, even standard, off-the-shelf contacts. Bigger companies say, ‘Sure, we’ll be glad to run them for you in about two months or so.’ A lot of times our customers can’t wait. With fourteen machines on the floor, we’re running about 20,000 contacts a day, and we’re set up to run them twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. We have two full-time shifts and one short, lights-out shift. If our customers want fast delivery, they get it. That’s what we do.”

But, according to Kielbus, his success also has to do with his technical expertise when it comes to connectors.

“Almost any machine shop can buy machines and make contact sockets,” he says, “but when you have 300 contacts that have to all fit and meet the insertion force specifications, you have another story. You have to know what you’re doing to get those insertion forces right. It’s all controlled by mil spec, of course, and those specs are tight. Probably my biggest strength has been that I can deal with customer engineers. We’re able to help them design their connectors so they get them right the first time. If you know anything about how the military and the government works, you know it takes forever to get a change through the red tape. So, our customers come to us with their designs and we help them get it right *before* they submit their drawings to the government for approval. I really believe that it’s this expertise we have that accounts for our success. Our cus-

tomers feel comfortable with us, because they know we know what we’re doing.”

Equipment Matters, Too

Kielbus, who is a stickler for precision, over the years has bought a lot of machines, both for his previous employers and for his own business.

“Right now we’re running seven Tornos Deco 2000s and seven Citizen Cincom R04s,” he says. “I bought the Decos when I first started and in the past two years I bought the Citizens, all of which are equipped with LNS Tryton automated bar feeders.”

Why two different brands of screw machines?

“Some people ask me why I have two kinds of screw machines,” he answers, “Actually, I like the Decos. They’re good machines, but I bought the Citizens when they came out with the R04 equipped with a sub spindle. They cost less than the Deckels and I can make the same parts on them with good precision. Another reason I bought the R04s is that they have higher rpms. When you’re running the machines twenty-four hours a day, you don’t want to drive the machines at max all the time. You want them to cruise, because that way they last longer.”

Kielbus feels the sub spindles on the Citizens significantly increase his shop’s productivity.

“I like to pick up the part and generate the radius on the back,” he says. That’s more difficult to do without a sub spindle. Also, we’re just starting to get into producing contacts for the microwave industry and with two spindles we can make two parts at a time. Without a sub spindle we could only make one at a time.”

Spindle speeds on the R04s are: 200-20,000 rpm for the main spindle and 100-10,000 rpm for the back spindle.

“The R04s offer a lot of speed and precision,” Kielbus says. “They’ve given us a lot more capability. At the moment we can produce just about any order that comes in the door, faster and better than ever before.”

A Look at the Future

With his rapid growth and success behind him, where does Kielbus see taking his business in the future?

“Well, I’m not really overly ambitious,” he says. “I see the economy overall is picking up, and I think that the military will continue to be strong for the foreseeable future. I think that commercial industry has used up their spares and a lot of hardware, so I think they’ll be picking up soon, too. I see maybe another four or five machines down the road and maybe another four or five people, but my real goal is to continue serving my customers by delivering quality contacts quickly. Basically I want them to keep coming back because of what we do here, not who we know.” ■