

Pandemic and Pivot Positioned Web Industries to Meet Emerging Demand for Diagnostic Tests

by Aaron Moberger, NE Chapter President

What do you do at the beginning of a global pandemic when over 60% of your revenue comes from business in the aerospace industry? That is the question employee owners at Web Industries had to ask in March 2020. Estimates at the time predicted that the aerospace industry would be severely depressed for several years and may only recover by 2024—a serious challenge to Web's business.

Web Industries began in 1969 when founder Bob Fulton raised \$10,000 from family and friends and started to serve the rolled good slitting and spooling market in the greater Boston area. Over 50 years later, Web Industries' products play a role in nearly every market that uses flexible materials, serving their three major divisions—aerospace, medical, and industrial & consumer—out of six facilities in the United States and three in Europe.

Their aerospace business began in 1981, formatting thermoset composites for the light weighting of wings and fuselages for Boeing. Since then, they became the only approved global supplier of certain critical parts for long-haul, widebody commercial aircraft, like the well-known Airbus A350 and Boeing 787. In 2013, they purchased CadCut to add ply-cutting and kitting capabilities for the manufacturing of engine parts and other structural components to their repertoire. By 2020, up to 62% of Web Industries' value-add revenue came from its aerospace division. Then in March, the pandemic brought commercial air travel to a halt, and Boeing and Airbus suspended all major aircraft deliveries.

Despite such adversity in the aerospace market, Web Industries' medical business unit was poised to contribute to the overnight need for vast quantities of rapid antigen COVID-19 tests. We have all become familiar with such tests because of their widespread use in COVID-19 diagnostics; however, Web's employee owners began to develop lateral flow immunology technology and capabilities in 2014,

and so were well prepared to take on the challenge to scale to 2 million tests per week.



Reel-to-reel assembly and lamination of multi-layer test strips support high-speed manufacturing for large-scale medical testing programs. (Photo courtesy of Web Industries.)

Web's Holliston facility was its primary site for medical device manufacturing at the start of the pandemic. At the time, about forty-five employees worked there. By March 2021, six-hundred ten employees worked there—a 1300% increase! It took 10 months to staff the facility to that extent, adding an average of over 55 employees per month, an effort that required all HR staff and relocating operators from other plants in addition to hiring new ones. Additionally, they needed new high speed custom machinery, for increased throughput, which was supported by the Defense Production act. They also upgraded the enterprise resource planning and quality management systems. As if those challenges weren't enough, the plant underwent significant renovations to accommodate the new machinery and meet the increased demands for rapid antigen tests. And all the renovations happened in parallel with production. The result of these employee owners' concerted efforts yielded an impressive production of over 2.1 million tests per week by February.

As we proceed into the new normal, the question is: will the need for rapid antigen tests diminish? Far from it. Even as vaccination rates climb, tests are still an important tool for workers who must interact with large numbers of people, some of whom could be considered higher risk, like nursing home staff, schoolteachers, and administrators. With the spread of COVID's delta variant, it is as important as ever to rapidly diagnose asymptomatic carriers. Such tests are also a simple and cost-effective way to screen from home, rather than from a point of care or other test site. In fact, improvements in technology that make rapid, at-home diagnostics possible could carry over to a myriad of maladies, including detecting early indicators of heart disease, kidney problems, or cancer. With the possibility of convenient, early detection, chances for better therapy improve and

so too do the opportunities for recovery and better outcomes for patients.

What about the future of Web Industries' aerospace business? Despite challenges during the pandemic, Web continued to support their aerospace customers. They took the opportunity to resize the business while maintaining their core competencies and exploring opportunities in adjacent markets, such as military and defense, urban flying aircraft, and satellites. International travel and business travel in general remains slow, but Web is seeing some recovery in single aisle aircraft. With all these challenges and triumphs, Web Industries' employee owners have shown us that through employee ownership, like the aircraft they help to build, the sky is the limit!



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New England Chapter Officers at the SRCC in Denver, CO - Jan. 2020

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