

## **East Tech aims to go national Tool design start-up relies on robotics**

*By Mike Pare - Chattanooga Times Free Press*

East Tech Co. chief executive Roger Layne sees the new Chattanooga firm that does custom tooling design and computerized numerical manufacturing as ultimately having a national reach.

"Right now, we're in five states. The potential is nationwide," said Mr. Layne, who started the business about seven months ago.

With an investment of about \$1.2 million, including up to \$700,000 in equipment, East Tech is building robotic welding figures for the auto industry as well as custom machinery for nuclear and hydroelectric plants, he said.

In addition, said the business owner, the company produces custom equipment for the woodworking business.

"We're pursuing the nuclear machinery industry," said Mr. Layne, 53.

East Tech, which operates out of half of a 10,000-square-foot building the company bought on South Creek Road, has eight employees and plans to grow to 25 in five years. First-year sales are slated for \$1 million, and Mr. Layne hopes to double that figure in 2005.

"We see \$5 million-plus in sales in five years," said Mr. Layne, who spent more than 20 years at locally-based Tennessee Rand Co.

East Tech's state-of-the-art machinery helps productivity, he said. Computerized numerical manufacturing lets operators program computers to run the machinery.

"It takes operator error out of the programs," said Mr. Layne.

Tom Snow, co-owner of automated machinery maker T.J. Snow Co., said his company works with East Tech when it becomes overloaded on business.

"We're confident it will be done right and at a reasonable price. Roger will work whatever hours are needed to meet deadlines," he said. "With all the new machinery, he can get the utmost accuracy. The tolerance he can gather is better than some older machines, plus they're faster."

City Councilman Ron Littlefield, who toured East Tech's facility recently, said the site is markedly different from older machine shops, and he cited the company's computerized numerical controlled equipment.

"It takes a different type of educational program to equip people to do this kind of work," he said.

Mr. Layne said the company is adding in-house engineering services at the first of the year, helping to provide "the complete package" to Tennessee Valley Authority, Intech Inc., Hasko Inc., Mohawk Industries and other customers.

The native Chattanooga said he is fulfilling a long-held dream of running his own business.

"This is what I wanted to do since I was 13 or 14 years old," he said.

Mr. Layne graduated from Kirkman Technical High School and then studied mechanical engineering at Chattanooga State Technical Community College. He worked for Broad Street Machine Co., 3M Co. and later for Tennessee Rand. At Tennessee Rand, which designs and manufactures robotic systems for the South's growing auto industry, he spent the last 15 years as its general manager. -



Photo by Chad McClure Dennis Crossnow, a tool maker machinist at East Tech Co., works with new machinery. East Tech is a start-up company doing engineering work and building robotics.