

BUSINESS

Bench Tree Group

Drilling company experiences rapid growth

By Audrey Spencer

Bench Tree Group located its main office on the outskirts of Georgetown almost two years ago, and the company couldn't be happier with its somewhat remote location, Bench Tree President Aubrey Holt said.

A manufacturer of and testing center for drilling instruments to measure Earth's magnetic field for the oil and gas industry, Bench Tree needed a location that experiences little electromagnetic interference.

"It's very stable here," Holt said. "What we do is not appropriate for an industrial park. This is a facility that requires a great deal of isolation."

Bench Tree's calibration facility, which is surrounded by a perimeter to prevent metal, heavy machinery or traffic from affecting its sensitive equipment, was designed to look like a barn as part of the ongoing effort of Bench Tree to be a good neighbor to the farms that surround it.

The perimeter is important because metal, even as small as a single steel nail accidentally used in the building's construction, can throw off calibrations.

"Only solar storms and sunspots have an impact on us here," Holt said.

Bench Tree expanded from 1,700 square feet of space to its current 40,000-square-foot building in 2011, Holt said. The company planned to expand in five years, but is already looking at adding 18,000 square feet to its engineering and manufacturing divisions after two years.

In the same amount of time, the company has also expanded from 52 employees to 80, many of whom work in assembly and electronics technician positions alongside a team of mechanical engineers, physicists and computer scientists.

"We offer a complete line of [measurement while drilling] equipment," Technical Services Engineer Jeff Beran said. "We also offer support and service for all that equipment."

Beran said Bench Tree's product is placed behind large drill bits oil and gas companies use to drill. Using axis sensors, accelerometers and magnetometers, equipment at the surface can map where the drill head is and where it is going.

"It's fairly simple concept, but you have to know some of these holes are 20,000 or 30,000 feet long," Beran said.

The instruments Bench Tree produces



Photos by Audrey Spencer

Liz Studebaker, a Bench Tree Group employee, solders equipment together on a pointed circuit board.

could be described as surveying tools for use underground, Holt said. They measure angles and distances with a magnetometer, an instrument Bench Tree produces and maintains, to help drillers locate oil and gas wells.

"If [drilling companies] don't hit the reservoir right, it can cost tens of millions of dollars," Holt said. "That's why it has to be accurate."

Bench Tree's customers are located as nearby as Houston and as far as India. The company continues to expand globally as well, with plans to open offices in Canada and China within the next year, Holt said.

Bench Tree Group

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Technical equipment

Drilling equipment, such as these system protection electronics, must be "skinny and long" for companies to use in underground oil well surveying, Bench Tree Group President Aubrey Holt said. Manufacturing the equipment involves the use of circuit boards, colored wires and even microscopes. Technicians also do repair work to "legacy" and competitor equipment.



Rapid expansion

The business once manufactured measurement while drilling, or MWD, equipment in 1,700 square feet of space. After two years, Bench Tree Group is planning to expand to 18,000-square-foot at the end of this year. The company had expected to expand in five years, Holt said (pictured above).



Stable environment

To properly calibrate the sensitive equipment Bench Tree produces, the company had to locate in an area far from electromagnetic and environmental interference, such as metal and passing traffic. A perimeter ensures accurate calibrations in the building except in cases of solar storms and sunspots, Holt said.

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