

Lightspeed: Going Mobile

Not many folks twice Rich Breault's age have his experience in electronics manufacturing – and he's all of 42. Still too young to have attained official tech guru status, Breault nevertheless has founded a pair of companies and for a spell worked side-by-side with famed soldering authority Doug Peck.

A self-styled BGA specialist – Breault first began working with array devices in 1993 – his first company, NETCO Automation, was shoulder-deep in BGA services and prototype development (he sold the firm to Chase EMS in 1999).

Breault's latest enterprise is a quickturn prototype EMS company called Lightspeed Manufacturing. It's located in a new, built to order plant in Methuen, MA.

For good reason Breault was almost giddy as he walked us around the factory in April. The floor is stocked with new top-line equipment, much of which he purchased in cash at auction for pennies on the dollar. The company specializes in – surprise – BGA and other array services, including rework and reballing, and will also offer optical fiber splicing. With the RoHS environmental mandate looming, Lightspeed has already mastered lead-free BGA rework. (For those who worry about such things, Lightspeed says orders are coming in from assemblers that were mistakenly shipped lead-free BGAs by their component suppliers; they want Lightspeed to replace the lead-free balls with tin-lead.)

Breault has also mastered sage advice: "Don't try to be something you're not." Indeed.

Breault has stocked Lightspeed with staff he knows and trusts. Many of company's eight employees are in their second go-around with Breault. At one station, team leader of BGA rework services Steve Angers pauses from his work to demonstrate a technique for reballing a μ BGA. A few minutes later, Breault is trading gentle barbs with Debbie Silva, the head of quality assurance and another veteran of NETCO.

But even veterans might be surprised at Breault's latest brainstorm: Assembly rework and repair, to go. Lightspeed Mobile, launched last month at Nepon East in Boston, promises skilled technicians at your beck and call, ready to solve the nuttiest of problems.

"Whether it's an assembly job, BGA rework, repair or whatever, if it's about electronics assembly, our trained specialists are ready to go on-site and take care of it," Breault says.

His team is ready to travel wherever and whenever needed – be it for an hour, a day or a week. And the squad, though small, oozes a mix of accountability and collegial volition that backs him up. It is not uncom-

mon for the staff to be working at all hours, Breault admits, though none of them appear under-the-gun. Fittingly, a van sporting the appropriate decals touting Lightspeed sits in the company parking lot, waiting for a service call, or perhaps a late night pizza run.

It is the van that makes Lightspeed "mobile," but it is the know-how and timing that will make it succeed. Customers could package and transport jobs to Lightspeed, but it is quicker and more cost-effective to make the call and stay at home, the company says. With Six Sigma getting more than just lip service, manufacturers are paying closer attention to process control, and as such would be less willing to send out problem jobs than in the past. Perhaps Lightspeed Mobile is the rare combination of the right idea at the right time.

"Our operators are trained, skilled and properly certified; they also work with electronic circuits every day. They'll come in with the appropriate tools, ESD protective gear and everything else required and get the job done quickly, reliably and cost-effectively. They're using state-of-the-art equipment, from soldering and rework equipment to inspection."

What's intriguing about this concept is how well it fits within the service-first model that many domestic companies are waking up to and embracing today. Over and again, I hear small and mid-size manufacturers tell of how they have seen margins stabilize – and even improve – simply by executing and making life easy for their customers.

Maybe that's why so many pundits have opined that when it comes to electronics manufacturing, North America will become the land of designing and prototyping, and will be heavy on service. Personally, I don't think the future will be anything near that narrow. Either way, Lightspeed Mobile is a 10,000 W halogen bulb of an example why ingenuity still has a place in North American manufacturing.



Mike Buetow

Mike Buetow, Editor-in-Chief
mbuetow@upmediagroup.com