

COVID-19 and the Shot Peening Industry

I SELDOM WRITE about timely subjects because I begin developing an article four months before the publication of the magazine. And, as we know, a lot can happen in four months. The pandemic will have such a lasting impact on the global economy, however, that I felt an article on our industry’s response to the pandemic was a relevant topic. Thank you to everyone that responded to my questions. I greatly appreciate your input.

Tom Brickley, Vice-President, Electronics Inc.

Electronics Inc. (EI) stayed open during the pandemic. “We received letters from three essential businesses requesting that we stay open because we are critical suppliers. We made copies of the letters for employees to keep in their cars if they were pulled over by law enforcement during Indiana’s stay-at-home lockdown. Our staff was never questioned but we wanted to be safe,” said Tom.

EI let people work from home if their jobs allowed it. EI wants everyone back in the facility once the pandemic is over but has always enabled staff to work from home under special circumstances. For example, when an employee was undergoing chemotherapy, but wanted to continue working, she was able to work from home.

“I worked from home part-time because I have a high-risk family member and I was concerned about exposing her to the virus. Jack (Jack Champaigne, President of EI) worked from home part-time but we both maintained a presence at EI while practicing extreme social distancing. The only downside to working from home is that I gained weight,” said Tom.

“We’ve always had bottles of hand sanitizer around the EI facility and foot-pull door openers on the restroom doors. After the pandemic started, we put foot-pull door openers on every door and hand sanitizer on every desk. We practice social distancing. Workstations and other surfaces are sanitized every day,” said Tom. Some EI employees wore masks and gloves and warehouse workers that handle ingoing and outgoing product wear sterile gloves. “Many of us have noticed how much healthier we are. In the past, colds, the flu and stomach viruses would spread through the EI staff. We haven’t had any of these illnesses during the pandemic. We will probably continue some of these practices,” said Tom.

Before the pandemic, EI held their weekly engineering meetings in a conference room. Because it was impossible to practice social distancing in the meetings, they began to use video conferencing and will continue to use it with customers.

When asked how long he expects our industry to recover from the economic downturn, Tom said, “Good question. I’m hoping we will get back to normal within six months. At the beginning of the pandemic, we were swamped with Almen strip orders because customers were stocking up. We’re not sure what sales will be like for the rest of the year but we’re maintaining high inventory levels of all our products.”

“Ironically, air travel is probably safer than ever because planes are being sterilized. We will be traveling as soon as the demand for training returns,” said Tom. In closing, Tom added, “Everyone at EI wants to work.”

Dr. Yoshihiro Watanabe, President and CEO, TOYO SEIKO CO., LTD.

We continued to produce cut wire shot media in Japan and Thailand, but not in

Interview Questions

1. Were you able to stay open during the pandemic as an essential business?
2. Did some of your employees work from home? If yes, will you let employees to work from home after the pandemic if their job allows it?
3. If you worked from home, what did you learn from the experience?
4. What precautions did you take to keep your workplace safe?
5. Did you develop new ways of working? For example, using Zoom for company meetings.
6. Did you incorporate new ways of working that will be useful after the pandemic?
7. How long do you anticipate our industry to fully recover from the pandemic?
8. Under what conditions will you and/or your staff resume business air travel?



the U.S. Our sales volume dropped, however, while OEM car manufacturers were shut down around the world.

We changed our work policies and we allowed some of our employees to work from home. This new working style could be acceptable after Corona. All employees in TOYO SEIKO facilities were required to wear masks and their temperatures were taken before each workday. Zoom video conferencing was used for internal meetings and with several of TOYO SEIKO's customers. We might continue to use Zoom meeting.

I think the recovery of the industry depends on the region, but I think it will be completely terminated in 2021. It is more desirable to develop vaccines and specific medicine. We will resume air travel as soon as each country's immigration restrictions are lifted.

Mengxi Wang, Sales in Charge, Jiangsu Daqi Metal Surface Preparation Co., Ltd.

Most businesses in China needed approval to open after the country's Spring Festival Holiday, where the COVID outbreak happened. (Editor's note: The Spring Festival is also known as the Chinese New Year or Lunar New Year. It is celebrated throughout China and it lasts for several days.) We were meant to get back to work on February 8, however, because of the long holiday and the time it took to prepare the documents for approval to open, we didn't start production until February 17.

All of Jiangsu Daqi Metal Surface Preparation's employees were required to work onsite but many precautions were taken. These precautions included:

- Workers back from other cities or towns were required to quarantine at their houses or appointed hotels for 14 days.
- Local workers had to show their travel record before entering the worksite.
- Temperatures were taken from every worker before they entered and left the worksite.
- Employees were required to wear masks.

I don't expect the industry to fully recover before autumn or the end of this year. We will not be attending industrial exhibitions and meetings in 2020 and we will not resume air travel until the health risks are stabilized.

Steve DeJong, President, Profile Industries

Profile Industries supplies agri-food businesses and medical device manufacturers and therefore was an essential business. Our employees in sales, marketing, and administration worked from home. I have always worked from home in the evenings after a day in the office and the manufacturing plant.

As far as employees that continued to work at Profile, items that were touched regularly were sanitized daily and employees practiced social distancing. Our staff used Zoom during the pandemic and will continue to use it.

I hope the industry will recover in three to six months and we will resume air travel as soon as restrictions are lifted.

Keynes Khu, Marketing Director, Dafeng Doshine International Co., Ltd.

The employees of Dafeng Doshine worked during the pandemic and office employees worked from home. We hope all people can work at the office after the pandemic! We took safety precautions including keeping a safe distance from each other, avoiding gatherings, wearing face masks and hand washing.

Dafeng Doshine experienced a downturn in business and I believe it will be two years before the industry recovers. The staff will resume air travel as soon as we see all numbers under control from WHO (World Health Organization) and all public places are opened.

Mike Deakin, President, Pellets LLC

While we didn't apply for essential business status, we received notices from several of our customers that they were essential businesses and they expected us to stay open. We have customers in defense, aerospace and medical industries.

A few of Pellets' employees worked from home but I don't see this as ongoing after we are over this crisis. The staff practiced social distancing and masks were provided for employees that chose to wear them. Work surfaces were sanitized, and hand sanitizer were provided throughout the facility. I have a feeling it will be many months before business will recover to pre-pandemic levels. We don't do a lot of air travel so we will play it by ear.

Mike Wern, President, Engineered Abrasives®

As an essential business, Engineered Abrasives® (EA®) was open during the pandemic. When asked what precautions were taken to keep the workplace safe, Mike replied, "We've always had a very clean operation," but he took extra measures by hiring the services of a company named Pure Maintenance. Pure Maintenance sterilized the EA facility with a dry fog coronavirus treatment that protected the staff from surface-to-human transmission.

Mike anticipates the industry will recover in a few months. "We will fly when we need to but most of our travel is done by driving," wrote Mike.

Scott Nangle, President, Empire Abrasive Equipment Co.

Empire Abrasive Equipment, deemed an essential business, stayed open during the pandemic. However, some employees chose to work from home. To keep the remaining staff safe in the workplace, we practiced social distancing, surfaces were sanitized four times a day, and all meetings were held by conference calls. Everyone got more comfortable with virtual tools. I don't expect the industry to fully recover for 24 to 36 months.

We will resume business travel if the work is essential and if the employee feels comfortable traveling.

Don Wildrick, Sales and Marketing Manager, Quality Engineering Services

Quality Engineering Services is an approved supplier to major aerospace manufacturing companies. Because of our longtime relationship with these companies, we continued to service them during this pandemic. We were fully operational as an essential business while following the recommended CDC guidelines. As an approved source, we provide these major customers with tooling designs for precision fixtures, gauges, fabrications and cast urethane masking tools and components.

Our design and sales personnel were able to work from home, however, in our business communication between design, engineering, manufacturing is more efficient when we are all in the same facility sharing information. Also being able to visit a customer to review a design concept is important because that can answer many questions and starts the whole process off correctly. So working from home can be convenient, but in our business all our departments working in the same facility has many advantages.

Hopefully for everyone, including our industry, we will all recover healthy from this pandemic and find a sense of normalcy again soon.

Joe McGreal, Vice-President Sales and Marketing, Ervin Industries

Ervin remained open as an essential business. To maintain the safety of our employees, we implemented a 100% Wellness Screening program and employees had their temperatures taken and participated in short interviews with a health professional.

Some of our employees worked from home, mostly the administration staff. We have no plans to let employees work from home after the “shelter-in-place” mandate is lifted. We will, however, accommodate anyone with a medical condition that leaves them at risk by working in our offices or plants.

Working from home can be efficient and productive for the tasks that do not require human interaction. This is a time saver when eliminating co-worker distractions and/or non-work related conversations (water cooler). Joe goes on to make this good point, “However, with a drastic reduction in business activity, working from home can give the appearance that it works great and can continue. What has not been tested is how this would work if we were at normal business levels.” He added that moving documents from department to department is a burden when you can’t share them on paper. Short questions and answers to solve problems take too long and slow down the total work output. Office phone technology is gone and too much time is spent trying to communicate. Ervin used Skype in the past and used it occasionally during

the pandemic. “We tended to use voice conference calling so we don’t have to see the crazy living conditions of our co-workers,” added Joe.

I don’t see the changes Ervin made during the pandemic as permanent—they were a way to mend a problem. The majority of our staff (95%) can’t wait to get back in the office.

I estimate it will take a year for our industry to return to normal but the Ervin staff and I will resume air travel as soon as our customers, trade associations and other business activities allow. “We are 100% behind getting out into the business work place to promote the good features and benefits of our products. We are not convinced (yet) that commerce will trend away from “live” interactions for the most efficient education of the market place,” he concluded.

Walter Beach, Vice-President, Peening Technologies

Peening Technologies received a letter from the Department of Defense that allowed us to stay open during the pandemic.

Many people worked from home and some came into the office one day a week. Regarding working from home, Walter wrote, “It improved life balance—I got to see my kids more than I normally do.”

Peening Technologies took multiple steps to keep employees safe in our facilities. An hour separation was added between shifts and employees took an active role in disinfecting commonly touched surfaces before and after their work periods. Masks were provided and were required in areas where employees worked closely together. Tables were removed from the break room and employees ate outside or in their cars. A professional deep-cleaning service came in on weekends.

Peening Technologies used Zoom internally and Webex with most customers. We used Webex to get approval on new processes from customers. I have a feeling that may be a permanent change.

I estimate the aviation industry will take two years to return to where it was in February 2020. As far as flying again, “I’m hopeful that by September, we can resume flying. However, personally I’ll be waiting until these planes have been back in the air for a few weeks. Who knows what problems will arise from bringing these planes and crews out from cold storage,” he wrote.

Sinto America, Sinto Staff

Sinto America’s shot peening service companies—National Peening and Technical Metal Finishing—are considered essential businesses with customers in aerospace, life science/medical, infrastructure and transportation. These businesses remained opened although we were affected by GE’s shutdown schedule across a number of plants. Sinto America’s Roberts Sinto Corporation, as an automation and services supplier to foundry and general manufacturing businesses, is not

an essential business, but remained open as a critical parts and service supplier to many essential businesses serving aerospace (military), infrastructure, medical and transportation companies. (Michael Halsband, CEO Sinto America)

The majority of office employees across all Sinto America companies, including Mexico, worked from home since the initial shelter-in-place executive orders were announced in March. "With manufacturing and services personnel still performing work at reduced levels, our HR and Executive Management teams have been in regular attendance to ensure the safety of our employees and provide onsite leadership," wrote Michael.

We can say with certainty that this pandemic forced us to do what we otherwise would not have done, allowing the majority of office employees to work from home. The interesting observation is that for certain roles the location at which the work is performed is not important. We increased the frequency of team calls to catch up and share thoughts and ideas as well as progress on projects. These calls, attended by all employees of a department, enabled us to have efficient communication, to continue to work in lock-step with each other and perform at the expected highest levels. Based on this very positive experience we will be open to some level of home office work in the future. Nevertheless, certain positions in engineering or specific people on the leadership team require to interact frequently with others and they will most likely be asked to work in the office again full time once the health risks from the pandemic have been mitigated. (Michael Halsband, CEO Sinto America)

Rachel Lunce, Human Resources Director Sinto America wrote, "During the shelter-in place, I split my time between working from home and working from the office. Since this was my first true experience working from home, I did learn quite a bit from it. The main thing I learned was to be flexible. Working from home causes unforeseen and unplanned occurrences that arise daily. Accepting that our normal routine was changing made the experience easier to accept. I made a "new" normal routine and went with the flow.

Second, communication was key. Not physically being with your co-workers forces you to overly communicate with emails and phone calls because you cannot just walk over to the desk when questions come up. Lastly, I learned to truly appreciate my office at work and my daily interactions with my co-workers. I found myself excited to get ready to go to work and have in-person conversation and interaction.

Sinto America developed a Preparedness and Response Plan Playbook for employees and trained everyone on the content. This plan included our COVID-19 screening process for employees and visitors entering into the facility, our cleaning procedures, social distancing requirements, proper handwashing and required PPE to be worn at work which includes wearing mask inside the facility. We conducted all of our meetings via WebEx and we initiated a weekly newsletter

to communicate with all employees on COVID-19 updates, new company policies and positive news on events going on within our organization. (Rachel Lunce, Human Resources Director Sinto America)

Sinto America is taking a very conservative approach to the recovery after the pandemic. We are preparing for a longer term recovery that may take three to four years to come back to pre-pandemic levels. The company is taking a similar attitude toward air travel. Safety is our number one objective and given the current situation it is unlikely that we will allow our employees to utilize air travel any time soon. We will allow air travel as soon as reliable passenger testing prior to boarding a plane is in place. (Michael Halsband, CEO Sinto America)

PROTO Manufacturing, Maria Veinberg, Technical Writer
PROTO was deemed an essential business and was able to stay open during the pandemic. We take customer service very seriously, so we are glad we could continue operating with minimal interruptions while still maintaining strict safety measures.

About half of our employees were able to work from home during the pandemic. Thanks to our advanced cloud-based technology that has been implemented over the last couple of years, working from home was an easy transition for most of our employees. By making use of company Slack, Dropbox, and email platforms, employees could maintain their regular level of communication with coworkers and supervisors.

Working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic showed us that we could accomplish many more tasks remotely than we previously thought. Many employees were new to working from home, but they were able to adapt and remain productive after only a minor learning curve. By using the proper tools, employees could hold meetings, participate in fruitful group conversations, plan and complete projects, and work as a team to solve problems.

In addition, communication became more intentional and, in some cases, more effective while we worked from home. Employees could no longer stop by their coworkers' desks to catch them up on a particular project; instead, they had to make a conscious effort to update them electronically, which often resulted in clearer, more beneficial communication strategies.

In terms of maximizing our productivity from our home offices, we learned a few valuable lessons. Firstly, setting boundaries is important. We realized quickly that we needed to communicate with our family members and let them know when we were working so that everyone was on the same page. We also found that starting and ending at the same time as we normally would, as well as taking our scheduled breaks, helped us transition more easily to working from home. For our employees who were working on site during the pandemic, we prioritized health and safety by putting

new policies and procedures in place. Most importantly, we limited the number of employees present on site by allowing employees to work from home whenever possible. We closed our workplace off to the public to limit in-person interactions, and we prohibited in-person meetings. Sanitizer was placed at the entrances for employees to use upon entry/exit of the building, and highly touched surfaces were disinfected multiple times each day. Through a series of company memos, we advised employees to clean their workstations regularly, adhere to social distancing and hygiene guidelines, and find ways to keep their immune systems strong. Finally, we had daily health and safety check-ins to assess new information and set guidelines, and we encouraged employees to provide their input via Slack in dedicated health and safety channels.

Although PROTO already used Slack before the pandemic, we started using more advanced features such as voice calling, video conferencing, and screen sharing. We also used Zoom to communicate with customers.

The new methods we incorporated will certainly be useful after the pandemic is resolved. For example, some employees may work from home from time to time. In addition, we will continue voice chatting via Slack, as it makes meetings and communication more efficient between employees at different office locations.

It's tough to say how long it will take for the industry to recover. However, we're hopeful that there will actually be a positive effect on our industry once the pandemic is resolved. Our industry is resilient and hard working, and we imagine that our eagerness to work will only increase once we all return to our on-site jobs. Because of this pandemic, we've definitely learned not to take things for granted, and being able to go to work and see our coworkers is one of them.

Business air travel is prohibited until government officials announce that it is safe to travel again. This will involve isolation/lockdown rules being lifted and a thorough assessment of the safety of all our employees and customers. Until that happens, PROTO employees can drive or assist customers remotely when possible.

Jeff Pruitt, Marketing Coordinator, Magnetic Inspection Laboratory

Magnetic Inspection Laboratory (MIL) remained fully operational as an essential business per Homeland Security and the Department of Defense. We process a variety of medical, defense and other highly essential components on a daily basis. Medical supplies were prioritized and expedited by our production teams in order to ensure necessary equipment for fighting against COVID-19. It was our goal to not only support our customers' efforts, but to provide assistance to those on the frontlines of this pandemic as well. MIL prioritized the following:

- Medical Equipment: Respirators, Ventilators, Oxygen Delivery Systems, Medical Diagnostic Systems (COVID testing), Surgical Instruments
- Defense Equipment: Fighter jets (F-35, F-18, F-16), Military cargo carrier (C-130), missile systems (THAAD, Hellfire, PAC-3), Avionics
- Space Systems: NASA, SpaceX

MIL provided the opportunity to work remotely to all employees capable of successfully continuing their daily functions off-site. MIL has invested in the proper equipment and technology to ensure those working from home have all the proper tools at their disposal. For those still working on site, MIL was able to develop a new shift rotation to limit contact between employees.

"Coffee is an essential item when working from home," wrote Jeff. Clear and concise communication is necessary to get high value information to others quickly and accurately. The number of tools at our disposal to collaborate is astounding. The industry should be prepared for an eventual shift into a more digital-based realm. From trade shows to the increase in webinars, we may be in for a drastic change in how we do business.

For those working at MIL, the company was quick to develop an internal response team to coordinate and facilitate urgent action items throughout the company. This team constantly relayed vital information to ensure everyone was aware of the current company status, updated safety protocols, information on COVID-19 symptoms and testing opportunities, etc. We implemented teleconferencing capabilities in order to support our employees working from home. We have physically rearranged departments and communal areas to accommodate social distancing protocols and limit the capacity of each area.

Additional precautions included building-to-building part transport procedures were given enhanced safety measures and procedures, development of new disinfecting protocols and procedures, including an atomizer for disinfecting large areas, new illness and return-to-work procedures and protocols have been implemented. Due to the sudden run on hand sanitizer, our in-house chemist created our own following FDA guidelines.

Prior to the pandemic, MIL upgraded their internal phone system to Dialpad. Dialpad is a cloud-based phone platform that allowed our team to keep in constant contact through phone calls, group video chats, and messages. This system seamlessly integrates with MIL's Microsoft Office programs, such as Microsoft Teams, which has helped improve our collaboration with employees working on and off-site.

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INDUSTRY NEWS

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MIL is currently renovating a third building to be added to our campus at 1455 Greenleaf Avenue. The new addition will require our team to be able to communicate and work across three different locations. During the pandemic we have restricted/limited access between buildings which has strengthened the skills necessary for us to work effectively and efficiently in such a setting.

Based on the previous downturns in the industry, first in 2001 and then again in 2007/2008, I would estimate several years before the industry is back near 100% capacity and production.

MIL is utilizing the Illinois stay-at-home orders as well as the internally developed response team to coordinate and gauge when our staff will be allowed to travel via air again.

Jesús De la Garza, Equipos de Abrasión, S.A. de C.V.

Since some businesses were considered as “critical manufacturing” under prior guidance from Mexican government because their fabrications are used to support utilities, power grids, medical appliances, food services, etc. Some of these business sent us communications that Equipos was a supplier in their critical manufacturing processes and requested our cooperation to continue supplying products if they were needed and urged us to remain open. We therefore made the decision to keep personnel in the office to assist with calls.

Some of our employees worked from home. Maybe once this pandemic ends and if the job allows it, we could continue with this practice creating some savings in some areas. I worked some days from home. It was not easy at the beginning since I do not have an office at home and needed to make some adjustments to have a private area as an office so I could concentrate on what I was doing with no interruptions, no pets, no noises, etc. Not a simple task.

To keep our workplace safe, we reduced the number of employees, keeping half in office and half at home. We took extra precautionary measures to ensure essential operations can continue without sacrificing the health and safety of our employees including social distancing and the use of respirators.

We used Zoom to keep communication with some of our customers, especially taking note of their future activities and dates for reopening facilities. It seems to me that Zoom and Skype will be the most useful tools in the immediate future as new ways of working. Employees began doing two or three tasks not done before, creating some flexibility in the business.

I estimate that industry will fully recover from the pandemic when we have a vaccine or medicine to avoid infection with this disease (approximately 6-12 months) but hopefully before. When we know that air travel and hotel lodging are safe for our employees, we will travel. ●



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