

HL PRECISION MACHINING

# HIGH QUALITY

## Champaign firm is Small Business of Year

By DON DODSON

dodson@news-gazette.com

CHAMPAIGN – A Champaign company that added jobs and new business in the midst of recession has been named the 2010 Small Business of the Year by the Champaign County Chamber of Commerce.

HL Precision Machining, which does work for more than 100 companies in 14 different industries, received the award Friday at the chamber's annual meeting at the Hilton Garden Inn.

"Their revenue and employee growth during hard economic times – in particular when manufacturing has struggled – is a testament" to why HL earned the award, said chamber President Laura Weis.

The company, formerly known as Harlan & Lash Machining, was renamed after it was acquired in June 2006 by current President and CEO Steve Hillard.

The firm, at 1302 Parkland Court, C, had 23 employees when Hillard acquired it. Today it employs more than 40.

Much of the company's growth stemmed from increased work for scientific-instrument and military/aerospace companies, Hillard said.

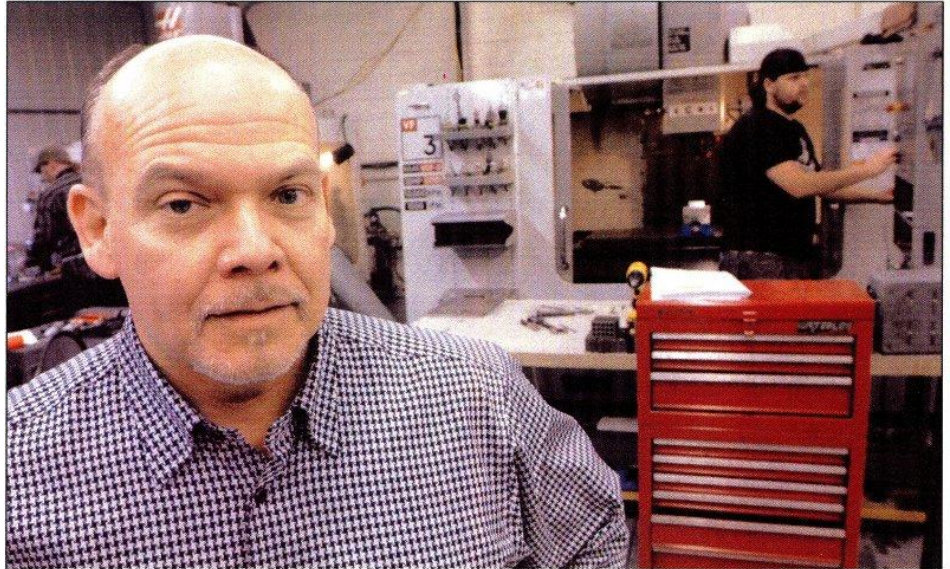
"We build parts and assemble cockpit simulators for military applications, fighter jets primarily," he said. "We make a number of radar-related parts and assemblies. We also make a number of close-tolerance repair parts for other manufacturing facilities that are actually used in manufacturing equipment."

Hillard, who previously owned the C.S. Johnson/Johnson-Ross plant in west Champaign, had used Harlan & Lash as a vendor. When he was looking for a business opportunity in 2006, the machining company seemed appealing.

"What I was looking for was a company that was not only in manufacturing, but also had a customer base that was focused on technology-based products," he said. "I was aware of the reputation they had for quality."

"A number of their customers were tech-oriented and obviously provided a growth opportunity," he said. "It wasn't work that was easily outsourced or offshored."

Hillard credited employees for adapting to changes that made growth possible.



Robin Scholz photos/The News-Gazette

### President and CEO Steve Hillard shows the milling department at HL Precision Machining in Champaign on Thursday.

"We were able to adapt and evolve the nature of operation to a precision-type machine. We launched a 'lean' manufacturing initiative a couple years ago that required a lot of change. It was hard, but our folks bought into it and in turn made us more competitive, not only for our existing customer base, but it also opened new doors," he said.

The emphasis was on eliminating waste, whether it was scrap, unused labor or the inefficient movement of personnel or materials. HL Precision Machining also added new functions, doing some assembly, in addition to making parts, and adding a certified welding operation.

"We leased an additional building adjacent to the property and moved our administrative offices to open up more space in the manufacturing shop," Hillard said.

Assembly work and welding operations were also moved to the leased building.

In the past year, HL's revenues have risen 13 percent, and Hillard said the business has grown about 50 percent since the acquisition.

Some machine shops do a fairly narrow scope of work, but in addition to CNC (computer numerical controlled) machining, HL does sheet metal

#### On the Web

<http://hlmachining.com/>

fabrication, welding and assembly.

Hillard said the company ships parts to an average of 60 different customers a month.

"We've been able to bring work back into the company that for a period of time was outsourced to China," he said.

Plus, the firm continues to hire employees. HL recently advertised for CNC machinists, both experienced and those who want to learn. Among the company's hires have been graduates of Parkland College's machining program.

Besides presenting the award at the annual meeting, Weis came to the HL workplace Friday morning to announce the award to employees.

Hillard said the opportunity to buy the company was "really an opportunity to invest in people." He said employees served Thanksgiving dinner at Restoration Urban Ministries two years ago and will again this year. Last year, HL employees contributed to Salt & Light's turkey drive.