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Walking around the shop floor at Forest City Gear, it's hard to tell there's an economic recession. Workers at the Roscoe, Ill. shop are busy programming machines as they grind, refine and inspect parts. They're fixing small gears for aerospace technology and large pieces for military applications. They've even built parts for NASA's Mars Rovers and NASCAR race cars.

The small company has seen a lot of change since opening in the 1950s, but with an emphasis on a niche product, Forest City Gear has continued to grow its reach into aerospace technology, defense contracting and even fishing reels.

Owner Fred Young has been quick to embrace change, updating machines every few years. That investment creates an environment of highly-skilled, technologically-savvy employees who continually build their skills.

"You can buy the best equipment in the world, but unless you invest in your workers and train them on this equipment you miss out on a competitive edge," says Young.

Not everyone has been so quick to the draw.

After 20 years of rapid evolution in technology, production-line efficiency and the global marketplace, the face of manufacturing is vastly more complex than it was 100 or even 30 years ago. Local behemoths of the past – the Ingersolls, the Whitneys, the Amerocks – have weathered that evolution in very different ways. Some have grown; some have evolved; others have faded away.

To some, this evolution looks like the swan song of the American factory. Dig a little deeper and a different picture emerges.

At Forest City Gear, about 65 people work various machining and quality control tasks. The factory floor is abuzz as workers move parts and press buttons on the machines that grind gears. When complete, those parts will become vehicles, military machinery and medical equipment.

There are endless possibilities for the company's applications, but their niche is high-quality gears. Like many manufacturers, it's their specialization that provides a competitive edge.

"We spend a lot on the bells and whistles so that if a special requirement comes along, then we have the flexibility to be able to do that job," says Young.

There's already a sense that those opportunities are growing. At Forest City Gear, several young employees around the shop are working on their technical degrees. Beside them are employees who have worked there for a quarter of a century. Because they entered the field in an earlier age, and because the company constantly updates technology, those workers have weathered the evolution.

Overall, that evolution has been long and often painful for northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin. But as local manufacturers wade through a recession and prepare for the next opportunity, the area's strongest employment sector is hardly fading away. Rather, it's changing with the demands of a new marketplace.