

MANUFACTURING'S 'GOLDEN AGERS'

BMW is forced to adapt its production lines to the needs of an aging workforce

► BMW has decided that just because an employee is running on old parts, doesn't mean he's ready for the junkyard. To prove it, the company has designed new production lines that cater to a rapidly growing part of the company's skilled workforce: those over the age of 50.

The high-end carmaker has spent \$28.5 million to convert part of a manufacturing plant in Dingolfing, a small town in southwest Germany, into a working space that's better suited to the Grey Power crowd. But this

isn't an act of generosity. It was crucial for BMW to make these modifications in order to retain its older workers. The number of BMW employees over the age of 50 will increase to 40% in the next decade, from 25% today. The company hopes to expand the benefits at Dingolfing to more than 4,000 other employees in the next year.

The new specially designed space has been nicknamed *Altstadt*, which means "old town" in German. The facility features a yellow-walled relaxation room,

and folding cots that resemble beach chairs are available for employees to crash on between shifts. Workers now sit on specially designed ergonomic seats, and the plant has enhanced lighting for more mature eyes. Mobile trolleys make accessing tools easier, and physiotherapists are on call to aid employees with workouts and therapeutic exercises. Most notably, the production line has been slowed down to a third of the normal speed. One aim of the changes is to coax highly skilled BMW workers back to the production line if they had been let go or had taken early retirement.

One BMW company spokesperson commented that this was the first plant of its kind in the world, and said it exemplifies the BMW motto "Today for Tomorrow." But BMW's aging workforce is one small part of a bigger population problem in Germany. In 2006, its birthrate was the lowest in Europe, and citizens over 65 already make up about 20% of the population.

That's a problem with which Canada is rapidly becoming familiar. In the next 25 years, the number of Canadians over the age of 65 is expected to double, and one in four Canadians will be 65 or over by 2041.

While Canadian companies aren't yet building boomer-friendly factories, they claim to have already implemented many of BMW's innovations. A Chrysler spokesperson said the company already makes many of BMW plant's features available to all their employees as a part of their World Class Manufacturing program. GM Canada has also had such programs in effect since the early 1990s, a spokesman says. "As a result, we have had an outstanding health and safety record for many years, even as the average age of our workforce increases," communications director Tony LaRocca says. "So, while others may be taking drastic measures today, the retooling of our plants started some 17 years ago, positioning us well to ensure safety and longevity of employment."

-JACQUELINE NELSON