

WEYERHAEUSER TODAY

DEC 2006/JAN 2007

THE INNOVATORS SAFETY AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE ARE PRODUCTS OF CREATIVITY AND RESOURCEFULNESS

Dave Putnam

You have to learn to fix things — like building go-carts and racecars out of spare parts — when you grow up without a lot of money. The mother of innovation is necessity, says Robert Williamson, a process engineer at the Tampa, Fla., box plant.

"I love a challenge on the mechanical side of life," he says. "And I love the nuts and bolts of the maintenance business."

Williamson began his career with Weyerhaeuser in 1969 after attending a trade school to certify in welding. He has no formal engineering education, but he's had a few night classes and years of practical experience.

"I'll try almost anything to see if I can make it work," he says. "But the reason I'm where I am today isn't

so much because of me. It's because of my team. I might have an idea and tell it to the guys, but we feed off each other."

His father, a cement factory mechanic for more than 40 years, first exposed Williamson to maintenance as well as a strong work ethic. Later, a friend sparked his interest in drag racing cars by teaching him the basics of putting together a precision engine.

"I always wanted to go faster," says Williamson. "That's how I got into racing."

Williamson lived near the Tampa Dragway as a child. After years of being around Don Garlits, the father of drag racing, he still solves problems with racing in mind.

"That's because in racing," he says, "you just can't afford to stop the car. The same is true in business with any production facility."

In the plant when something breaks, it gets fixed. If it breaks a second time, that's an indication of an underlying problem. To Williamson, it's a mechanical challenge.

"When you go harder and faster, a weak link will break," he says. "Doing the same fix over and over is just spinning your wheels, so what we want to do is eliminate the problem and move on to the next one."

Ell Townsend, site manager for the Richland, Miss., box plant, spent five years at the Tampa operation.

A couple of Williamson innovations stand out for him.

"One was a bundle breaker," he says. "It was used as a model for several others throughout Weyerhaeuser. He's made all kinds of machine improvements, and he designs replacement parts that are cheaper and last longer. He's a super guy who represents the company well."

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Townsend adds that the company replicated Williamson's design of a quick-change ink pump at other facilities, including the Bowling Green, Ky., training center. The pump reduces a 15- to 45-minute change-over to about two minutes.

"I absolutely love to solve problems," says Williamson. "I earn my pay by improving the plant. I do it for us, the team and the company."

— Kathy Stacey

ABOVE: Robert Williamson at the controls of his quick-change ink pumps at the Tampa box plant.

Robert Williamson is an innovator. On the following pages, you'll meet many more Weyerhaeuser innovators. These are people who, like Williamson, love a challenge and respond with creativity and resourcefulness — and make the company stronger.