

Welding talent with employers

Jerald Grimes is a welder at Kobelco Construction Machinery in Moore, SC, where he helps to assemble the upper and lower frames of the 20 ton hydraulic excavators the company produces for worldwide distribution.

"I like welding, any kind of welding," he says, excitedly. "I've been doing this for 31 years and love it."

The components that Jerald welds fit together are big and require from three to six passes to weld.

"He's one of my best welders," says Jason Martel, Production Fabrication Supervisor at Kobelco.

The fabrication area where Jerald works currently produces one and a half frame assemblies per day and are ahead of their schedule.

"We ship one thing out of the plant and that's a fully assembled excavator," says Eric Holland, Human Resources Manager at Kobelco. Eventually, the company will produce eight different types of excavators ranging in size from 17 to 50 tons. "Right now, we're producing one every two days. The next production goal is one a day. The capacity with one shift is 1,800 per year. That's upwards of nine a day, or one an hour."

Kobelco is a Japanese company and this site, which had its grand opening in June, is their first non-Asian manufacturing plant.

Jerald came to VR in August of 2015. He had to leave his previous job due to cutbacks in hours and prior to

that had been laid off from the manufacturing company he had worked at for years.

Although he had applied for other welding jobs, Jerald was never called back for interviews despite his years of experience.

"I really struggled with finding the right company, to get in for the interview, and to get hired," he says.

"Because a lot of companies do not have familiarity in working with people who are deaf, it takes time to prove yourself," adds Amelia England, Employment Coach and Counselor for the Deaf and hard of hearing.

Jerald had been keeping an eye on Kobelco, which built the facility in Moore in about a year. When he learned they were hiring, he put in an application, then came to England and said, "What do I do next?"

England provided counseling and guidance on how to get along with the hearing community, communicate with others, and communicate with supervisors and Human Resources. "And we provided interpreting services for accessibility needs, communication and training needs, and for meetings," she says.

During this time, Ryan Skinner, Business Development Specialist, reached out to Kobelco and met Holland. Skinner talked with Holland about Jerald's application, toured Kobelco and explained some of the business services that VR could provide, including interpreter support and rehabilitation technology assistance.



Jerald Grimes, welder, next to one the excavators produced by Kobelco in the Upstate.

“Jerald’s experience was exactly what we were looking for,” says Holland. “We emphasize hiring experienced people because of the nature of our business and how we need to ramp up very quickly. I can’t emphasize enough how well Jerald did in the interview process.”

The next step was for Jerald to take a very difficult welding test.

“We use a very particular type of welding here,” explains Holland. “Japanese welding is one-handed, which is not how American welders are taught. It relies very much on skill.”

“It took a couple of tries, but I did it,” Jerald says proudly. “And I got the job.”

After being hired, all of the welders participated in an extensive training program. Some of that training was by a Japanese associate who certifies every welder in Kobelco worldwide.

“Jerald certified at the highest level that was required,” says Holland.

Martel knew from the start that Jerald would fit in with his team. “He works hard, he’s cheerful, he goes above and beyond, he’s passionate and he’s knowledgeable.” Martel adds with a grin, “He and I get along great.”

Martel understands some of the challenges facing Jerald because he has a daughter who is deaf. He is also able to use a limited amount of sign language.

“I have a hard time signing and talking at the same time. So in our morning communication meetings, I let Jerald know that I’m going to communicate to everyone vocally, and then afterward, one-on-one with him.”

The rest of the team often asks Martell how to sign or spell words or phrases so they can improve their communication with Jerald. “I’ll show them how to spell something and then Jerald will give them the sign word for it.”

The team is also more aware of how to ensure that the workplace is safe for a deaf individual. One piece of equipment they use is a wireless crane, which produces an audible sound for safety. However, Martel asked the company that makes the crane for a visual indicator. “They installed a beacon light so that anytime the crane is moving, it’s also blinking. The welding hoods [that everyone wears] automatically darken and they respond to that light pulse. So, even with his hood down, if

Jerald’s not welding, it will blink inside. He doesn’t even have to look up. It’s very safe, and good for everyone.”

“I love the guys I work with,” says Jerald. “I really enjoy the teamwork, the willingness to help. We’re here for each other.”

“Our goal was to find the best people and VR helped us increase our pool,” says Holland. “It’s been great meeting someone like Jerald that we might not have found through a traditional type of recruiting. And the follow up services have been fantastic. With some organizations it’s like, ‘We got the person hired—okay, we’re done. That’s the end all.’ That isn’t the case with VR. The follow up help has been so beneficial to everyone throughout the process. It’s really been an ongoing partnership.”



(left to right): Jason Martel, Production Fabrication Supervisor, Kobelco; Ryan Skinner, Business Development Specialist; Jerald Grimes, Welder, Kobelco; Amelia England, Employment Coach; Linsey Cooke, Environmental Health and Safety/HR Specialist, Kobelco; Eric Holland, Human Resources Manager, Kobelco.

In the fabrication area, surrounded by the massive frames that Jerald and the rest of the team assemble, Martel watches as Jerald dons his gear and begins to weld.

“Give me more employees just like Jerald,” he says. “Disabilities are not business problems. Give me people that want to work, that care about their work. We can train them.”

After Jerald puts away the welder and removes his helmet, he simply says, “I love working for Kobelco. It’s a great environment.”

He’s thankful for VR’s support and assistance, and doubts that he would have been able to get this job on his own.

“VR didn’t give up. Amelia and Ryan did a great job helping me and providing me with all of the services I needed to get a job. They’ve really helped me and others in the Deaf community.”