

Nothing goes to waste

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Jan Scott, the co-founder of Unison Solutions in Dubuque, has a simple way of summing up his company's complex operations.

"We take what was once considered waste and turn it into a resource," Scott said.

During the course of the last decade, Unison Solutions, headquartered at 5451 Chavenelle Road, has carved a niche as a leader in biogas technology.

The company specializes in taking waste streams and turning them into usable fuel.

Unison Solutions conditions these biogases by removing moistures and other impurities.

Unison's clients can be found throughout the U.S., with Wisconsin, New Jersey and California serving as states in which the company does the most business.

Scott said Unison is attempting to break into international markets.

Despite the company's growing reach, one needn't look too far to see examples of its work.

The company participated in a comprehensive upgrade of the city of Dubuque's wastewater facility during the past three years, an effort that wrapped up in late 2013.

As a result of the upgrade, the city is capable of creating and cleaning its biogas, which is being used to fuel capstone turbines, create electricity and heat digesters.

Dave Broihahn, who started the company in 2000 with Scott, noted that Unison is discussing a third phase of the project, which could involve using the biogas for RnG (renewable gas) that could power city vehicles.

A similar project has been completed in Janesville, Wis.

Broihahn and Scott started Unison Solutions in 2000, shortly after leaving Alliant Energy in the wake of a merger that forced Alliant to reduce its number of management positions.

Unison Solutions was initially formed as a company that supplied support services to utilities, including Alliant. However, the company's focus shifted to biogas conditioning in 2004, shortly after



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Marty Kass works on fabricating biogas conditioning equipment at Unison Solutions on Friday.

company officials realized the emerging demand for that line of work.

The city of Dubuque's efforts to use a waste stream is indicative of broader trends in the industry, Broihahn said.

Municipalities and private industry are beginning to realize the bottom-line benefits of using what was once perceived as waste.

"The whole philosophy has changed," said Kim Murdock-Timmerman, communications director for Unison Solutions. "Even the terminology has changed. It is not called a sewer plant anymore, for example; it is called a water recovery plant."

As philosophies change, so, too, has the client base.

Broihahn said a diverse range of companies -- including everything from breweries to cheese producers -- have turned to Unison for biogas conditioning.

"Five years ago, 80 percent of our customers were municipalities. Now it's more like 60 percent are municipalities and the other 40 percent are new industrial customers or private developers," he said.

As the customer base grows, Unison also is diversifying its range of services, as evidenced by the recent launch of a new company named Quadrant Fabrication.

Scott and Broihahn hope to break into new markets by assembling and fabricating other companies' equipment.

Scott and Broihahn believe that the emergence of fracking -- the process of extracting natural gas from shale rock deep within the earth -- could fuel big sales in the future.

The company is working on fracking filtration systems, which would reduce the impact of fracking water on the environment.

Scott framed the creation of Quadrant Fabrication as another example of the company's diverse array of services and skills. As the company expands its reach outside of the biogas market, its founders take pride in doing all of the work themselves.

"We are big believers in insourcing," he said.

Unison Solutions employs 38 workers, a number that has risen steadily since the company was founded. Broihahn said Unison's workforce includes engineers, service technicians, journeymen electricians, welders/fabricators, CAD designers and more.

"We've realized it's unique to have a company with those different skill sets under one roof," Broihahn said.

Scott believes the company can get the most out of its employees by creating a laid-back

environment.

This free-flowing mind-set is reflected in the company dress code: One doesn't see an abundance of suits and ties when entering Unison; instead, the company is populated by men and women in blue jeans and flannel shirts.

Scott believes that sends an important message to workers.

"There's no blue-collar or white-collar distinction. We like to think of it as more of a think tank," Scott said. "We like to foster that creativity."