

# AUTOMATE TO MEET DEMAND

New technology can help when skilled painters are hard to find.

By Treena Hein

**M**ore than 100 manufacturers across Canada are painting in-house — and that means more are opting to automate the finishing process, especially for straight and mild steel.

"A lot of painting used to be outsourced but companies are now doing it themselves because they want reduced lead time," notes Lisa Smith, owner at DIT Manufacturing Systems, the Canadian distributor for dust-free finishing equipment made by Italy-based Gardline. "It also means that if something goes wrong with the finishing machine, say out of an order of an hour, you can deal with the problem right away and ship the order out."

However, if your painter is absent for any reason, explains Mike Janssens, general manager of automation division at Aquaflex, "If you don't have a back-up painter, you lose six to 10 days your painter is going to roll around until operations are up again," adds Janssens, who is head of customer relations at Aquaflex Tech, which has offered some hand-outs and advice for almost 25 years and has many operations in Ontario, Montreal, Chicago and other cities, including writing and automation technology. "There is only so much output a human can provide consistently in our job."

Janssens adds that in Ontario (where most of Canada's steel manufacturing occurs), there are not that many painters available and it's therefore really hard to locate them. "The competition is so fierce," she says, "that some other company is going to be desperate enough to go over your painter by offering a higher wage."

Therefore, instead of finishing a large painting line in-house by hand, steel makers are opting for automated systems, which are fast, consistent and require fewer and less skilled workers.

Janssens says this route has proved cost-effective for their customers in terms of logistics, material handling and overall warranty claims. By offering a more low-volume, die-cast, there is also no fruging painting between suppliers to ease of a problem.

However, there can be limitations to get a robotic system, notes Paul Brecht, sales manager at Quebec-based PNC Automation, the



Aquaflex Tech automates the process when it comes to machine maintenance. The robot (top) is the robot that will be used to paint the steel, using laser lines and moving forward to follow the top edge.

manufacturer. Janssens fears that the fact that steel finishing is so important in the industry where robotics are involved. "The fear of lack of talent to run the technology effectively is often present," Brecht observes, "but a robot is just a machine with six arms, motion, programmed like any other machine you use."

Like for the automated finishing systems made by PNC are quite high in Quebec (over an installation), and Brecht notes that this could be due to Quebec, steel firms having more difficulty getting workers than elsewhere in Canada, or simply positive word of mouth among customers there. "It could also be that some firms outside Quebec aren't looking at new R&D, not taking care of new machines right away," he says.