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REDARC Electronics is a sign of the changing face of South Australian manufacturing.

Doing it faster and smarter, about one-third of its 50 staff are white-collar specialists in electronics and product development working to beat competitors in the field.

The company employs more women than more traditional manufacturers – 17 women and 34 men – has an average workforce age of 38 and runs an active approach to training and developing school-leavers and graduates into high-level technical and management jobs.

Redarc exports to 10 countries and is expanding its range of power conversion products to growing industries. These include the resources, medical, marine and recreational vehicle markets.

Based in the traditional industrial belt at Lonsdale, south of Adelaide, Port Augusta-born managing director Anthony Kittel has supervised the company's growth.

Four years ago, he drew up a plan to double the workforce to 70.

Last year, Redarc opened a 2000sq m \$5 million Innovation Centre at Lonsdale to support the growth and further expand the product range.

Mr Kittel has seen many of the changes in manufacturing and the emergence of the state's electronics industry in his 42 years.

"The main thing I have seen is a far more creative and innovative approach in manufacturing," he says. "Not just in product design but in the way they manufacture, and the systems within the business, so they can quickly respond to customer requirements.

"These days the big thing is service and delivery and the performance of the manufactured product

is critical because it makes it tougher for an imported product to compete."

Mr Kittel and his wife, Michele, a cardiac nurse, bought the business 10 years ago. With four children, they are committed to keeping industry in SA and he is a passionate believer in creating jobs in his home state.

"I tend to run the business like a venture capitalist – focusing on staffing, making sure the right people are in the right places – and putting the right products on the market," Mr Kittel says. "Building the right culture and empowering people to make their own decisions will see the company thrive."

As well as Michele Kittel, former Mitsubishi Australia boss Tom Phillips, CMV Group director Paul Crawford and William Buck managing partner Jamie Keough sit on Redarc's advisory board.

Mr Kittel completed a master of business administration at the University of Adelaide in 1993.

He has come a long way since pumping petrol as a boy at his grandfather's garage at Hawker, in the Flinders Ranges.

After matriculating, he became a cadet mechanical engineer with BHP Long Products division (now OneSteel) at Whyalla in 1983. Qualifying as an engineer in 1987, he worked for BHP then SA car component supplier Arrowcrest before buying Redarc in 1997.

The company's recent \$5 million expansion was assisted by a \$1.6 million grant from the Structural Adjustment Fund for SA – federal funding to help the state's manufacturing industry rebuild after the closure of the Mitsubishi engine plant.

Mr Kittel says Redarc is constantly looking for people "keen to learn and develop skills and prepared to develop themselves personally".

"It's a step-by-step approach," he says. "You don't walk in on day one and have all the skills required.

"It's lifelong learning – there is a continuous process of learning and education."

He says high school grades and age are not a barrier – most important is having the "right attitude".

To find the right staff, the company offers traineeships and development programs for technicians (para-professionals) and graduate engineers.

"There are not enough engineers so we have to look at all those career paths to get the numbers," Mr Kittel says. "People with the theory and good practical experience also create a nice balanced feel to the company.

"I think the skill shortage is dire. We are only just starting to feel the real effects of it now and it will only get worse."

Redarc is a sponsor of SAYES (SA Youth Entrepreneur Scheme) and the TAFE Solar Car.

"We actively participate in the EIA (ei)2 skills/education initiative, SA Great Speakers in Schools program and Australian Technical College at Christies Beach (for electrical/electronic apprentices)," he says. "We also offer university and high school work experience and factory tours."

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Redarc Electronics chief executive Anthony Kittel.

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