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## Lightened Loads for Diverse Automation Users

### Fori Automation's AGVs and Integrated Systems Meet Automotive, Aerospace and Other Requirements With Care and Global Planning

By Jim Montague

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#### About the Author



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Gravity is a universal pain in the neck. However, because we all must struggle against it, those who can provide labor-saving assistance in one endeavor or industry can often deliver similar aid to others. This is the logic underlying 30-year-old [Fori Automation's](#) worldwide growth and its diversification into a variety of applications focused mainly on carrying, assembling, welding and testing heavy automotive, aerospace, and defense parts and products.

Located in Shelby Township, Michigan, just north of Detroit, Fori was founded by Arthur Koerner, in partnership with an earlier, Germany-based Fori in 1984, and then bought its U.S. operations about five years later. The company now is run by Koerner's son, Bernd, who serves as president, and a core management team, including global operations vice president Mike Beck, business development director Martin Erni, mechanical engineering director Paul Doan, controls manager Peter Karcz and sales vice president Paul Meloche.

"I sailed past the Statue of Liberty in 1954 and said, 'Well, here I am, and I'll do my best'," Arthur Koerner recalls. "So I watched, learned, tried hard and was rewarded well." Bernd Koerner adds, "My father and uncle were on the board when we started, and my uncle was in the shop with a half dozen guys because he'd worked at General Motors, Fraser Automation and other firms. Good engineering is where everything started for us, and it's still the key today."

Fori started out building automotive wheel-alignment machines and equipment for measuring toe and camber angles. Its first installation was at Pontiac's Fiero plant. Next, it moved into window and final assembly systems, body and paint shop equipment, and other solutions. These days, Fori designs and builds automated guided vehicles (AGVs), chassis marriage systems, 3D wheel

aligners, toe automation, headlamp aimers, fluid fill systems, roll and brake testers, and integrated systems for tires and wheels, tire loading and installation, caster/camber sets, front corner and engine dress up, motor and transmission assembly, carpet and cockpit installation, door and seat installation, and urethane and glass.

Because orders and projects can vary so widely, Fori's headquarters and 72,000 sq-ft, primary production facility in Shelby Township employs 186, but it adds contract engineering and support personnel as needed.

"This isn't a steady-state business," Beck says. "We're very project-based. We run on a tight schedule, but we're very organized so the entire landscape of our shop floor can change every two weeks."

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Despite its rapid expansion into new applications and markets, Beck adds that Fori is very careful in how it controls its growth and diversification, so it can maintain consistent quality and performance and preserve the reputation it's gained over the years. "We don't want to take on more than we can manage, and sometimes that means turning down some proposals we don't feel we can do our best work on," Beck says. "Many builders take on jobs they can't complete, and that leads to delayed vehicle launches, which tarnishes their reputations."

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To support all its vehicles, systems and customers, Fori maintains mechanical and software engineering and manufacturing facilities on four continents, as well as sales and service representation on five continents. Its subsidiary companies are in Brazil, China, Germany, South Korea, India and Mexico, which allows it to save customers considerable revenue by splitting tickets. For example, it recently employed five of the subsidiaries to deliver a large system to Volkswagen India, including project management by Fori Germany, design by Fori Germany and Fori USA, manufacturing and assembly by Fori Korea, Fori China and Fori USA, and installation by Fori India. Also, Fori worked closely with VW to split the contract between Fori Germany, Fori USA and Fori India by issuing scope-specific purchase orders (POs) in local currencies. This strategy gave the customer the lowest-risk and lowest-cost solutions, including a reduction in India's import tax by issuing the installation and commissioning PO directly to Fori India in rupees.

"Each company runs its daily business, but when we have an international project, we find the best strategy to solve it," Beck explains. "After we decide where's best to design, engineer and build each part, we talk to each region more. We're also globally integrated, so systems like our rail-guided cart (RGC) chassis marriage system are globally standardized across six or seven plants worldwide. This enables us to follow our automotive manufacturing clients from Michigan to their plants in Spain, Thailand, Brazil and elsewhere and assist them with local products, support and languages. Our footprint mirrors many of our customers' manufacturing sites, and that can be very valuable."

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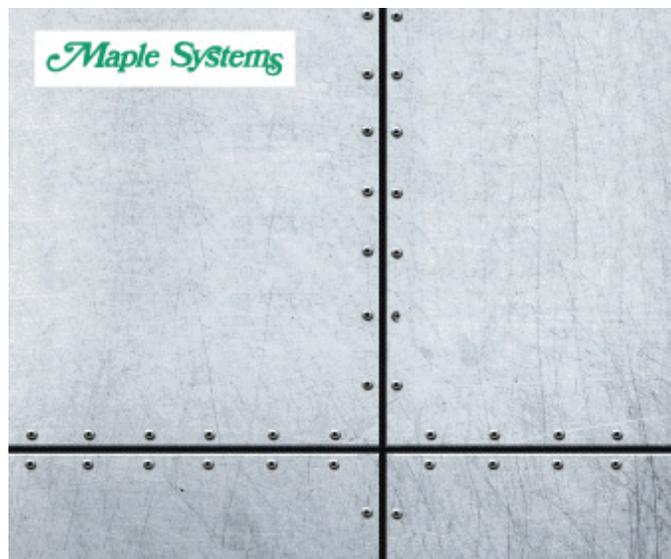
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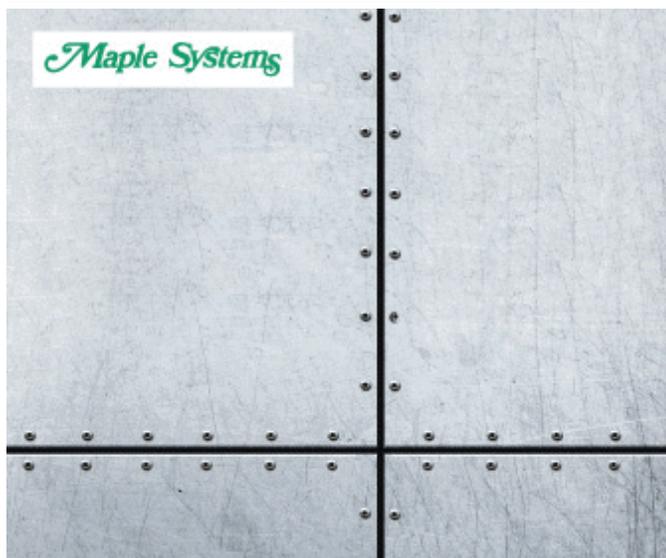
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