

# From cars to ships for auto transformers

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DIVERSITY: Axiom Precision Manufacturing general manager Craig Maynard at Wingfield. Picture: RUSSELL MILLARD/AAP



Factory expands as industry grows

CONSTRUCTION work begins next week on a factory

that will double the size of Axiom Precision Manufacturing's plant at Wingfield.

It is one of the companies defying critics who claim manufacturing is finished in South Australia and businesses are fleeing.

On a growth trajectory after resetting course as automotive manufacturing wound down, the South Australian familyowned business has found strength in diversity by supplying defence, health, aerospace and transport sectors.

"Earthworks start next week," Axiom general manager Craig Maynard said of building on an adjacent vacant block. "It'll be a defence-secure facility enabling us to work on higher end programs aimed at supporting the upcoming defence projects."

Australian Industry Group head in SA Stephen Myatt said manufacturing had been resilient since the closure of GMHolden in 2017.

"It is clear that the notion of 'no vehicle assembly industry – no manufacturing' is a misnomer," he said.

The sector's job numbers have increased from 65,100 in 2017 to 75,200 this February.

In 2009, 90 per cent of Axiom's work was automotive. By 2015, that was down to 50 per cent and it employed 40 people. Today, automotive accounts for 8 per cent, headcount has lifted to 62 and a target has been set of 100 employees within three years.

Pro Vice-Chancellor Research Impact at Flinders University John Spoehr said SA rode through the closure of automotive manufacturing.

"The impact has been less negative than any of us expected," Professor Spoehr said.

Aided by the lower Australian dollar, companies were able to absorb displaced automotive workers, benefiting from their skills in lean manufacturing, safety and robotics.

"For those who thought we should not be looking to manufacturing for future jobs growth – well, I think that's wrong," he said. "Look at the examples of Redarc, Codan, SAGE – they're all growing rapidly, in fact very rapidly. There's enormous potential to generalise that phenomenon."

Prof Spoehr said shipbuilding would now act as the learning centre for decades to come. "Lots of engineers and tradespeople and professionals will be trained through that industry," he said.

But more could be done. Australia needs a strategy on Industry 4.0 – integration of digital technology, manufacturing and consumer life.

He called for targeted tax incentives and "catapult" centres linking universities and business backed by serious investment.

Axiom's transformation has been achieved with state and federal financial support.

It now employs six apprentices after many years of not employing apprentices.

"Manufacturing has great potential, there are good job opportunities for school leavers and adults looking to change direction," Mr Maynard said.