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By Julia Bauer

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GRAND RAPIDS -- For 44 white-collar employees at Dematic Corp., Friday the 13th proved to be a bad omen.

When they arrived at work, they learned their jobs were being eliminated.

The cuts reduce the 1,200-member salaried work force by 3 percent.

They hit nearly every department and were not based on seniority or performance, spokesman John Clark said.

"Today's action will work to strengthen our competitive position," Clark said Friday.

"As a build-to-order company, it's harder to weather even the smaller downturns because we can't build something and put it on the shelf, to hope an order comes in."

Dematic is a descendent of Rapistan, a conveyor maker that got its start in Grand Rapids 70 years ago.

The current company was sold to private investors earlier this year by former parent Siemens.

U.S. headquarters, design and manufacturing of conveyors are based in a complex on Plymouth Avenue NE, north of Michigan Street.

Last month, the conveyor designer and builder laid off 50 hourly workers, although eight will be called back later this month.

The company has roughly 300 hourly employees.

The latest cuts in engineering, administration and office workers is part of a broad restructuring to make the operation more competitive.

Aggressive competition in the U.S. and Europe drove Dematic to look for ways to trim its costs.

"We evaluated many different options to help the company be more competitive in a difficult market, but ultimately decided that these changes are necessary for the health and future of the organization," said John Baysore, chief executive officer of North American operations.

"We understand how difficult this is for our employees, their families and the community, but recognize that we must restructure if we want to strengthen our position and move forward."

The layoffs, job eliminations and other cutbacks are not going to lead to an eventual shutdown, Clark said.

"We do have a solid backlog of orders, and are continuing to win business," he said.

"We're not planning on pulling out of Grand Rapids. This is our headquarters."