

Manufacturing in America

THE MANUFACTURING EXTENSION PARTNERSHIP: WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS IMPORTANT RESOURCE

The Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP) program is a well-kept secret that could greatly benefit your company. Created by the National Institute of Standards and Technology, or NIST, the program exists for the sole purpose of increasing the competitiveness of U.S. manufacturers. They do so by providing companies with services and access to a nationwide system of resources designed to help businesses compete globally. Those services include such strategies as lean enterprise, supply chain management, business growth, productivity, technology adoption, and more recently, energy and environmental sustainability.

Although the nationwide program has been in operation for over 17 years, many companies are still not acquainted with the MEP nor have they taken advantage of it, despite MEPs having achieved \$1.3 billion in cost savings annually and \$6.25 billion in increased and retained sales for their clients. Because the centers are funded by a combination of federal, state and private resources, it allows them to serve even very small companies. While services are not free (some exceptions), they are generally obtained at reduced rates, plus the MEP is able to orchestrate and leverage additional resources which companies may not know about.

There are 59 MEP centers with 443 locations in all 50 states and Puerto Rico. The MEP has a staff of 1600 specialists in business and manufacturing, and operates a network of over 3,000 affiliate partners with expertise in workforce and economic development, technological applications and manufacturing and business processes. Partners include private consultants, economic development corporations, trade associations, chambers of commerce, technical colleges and universities, state agencies and others.

Often the centers work in tandem with and are located on campuses of universities such as in North Carolina (the Industrial Extension Service at North Carolina State University), Iowa (the Center for Industrial Research and Service at Iowa State University) and Georgia (the Enterprise Innovation

Institute at Georgia Tech). They are also at technical centers such as the Michigan Manufacturing Technology Center. In California, two manufacturing technology consulting groups provide key services to northern and southern California, allying with community colleges, the California Employment Training Panel, economic development departments, as well as other state agencies and manufacturing experts.

No two centers are exactly alike and each determines how it will deliver services in its region. The Southern California MEP center has developed a "Small Manufacturers' Advantage" program that specifically addresses the unique business challenges of this segment. It is also possible for several companies to bring a request for services to an MEP. In New Mexico, a cluster of architectural millwork companies joined together to request training on issues common to each of their companies. The training was delivered to representatives from the companies over a series of Fridays which worked well for their schedules.

Some MEP programs are designed around topics that have a broad appeal. For example, a program called, "Eureka! Winning Ways," is an idea-engineering program targeting top line growth. It is a data-driven process to develop and craft at least 50 measurable smart growth ideas for new markets, new products or services. You choose four ideas for evaluation and with a Growth Coach, you develop a 30-day action plan to investigate and test your top two ideas for viability. This process has saved companies 80-90% of the staffing, time and money usually employed to move ideas to reality.

One of the newer initiatives of the MEP is the Green Supplier's Network (GSN). Through this program, manufacturers or suppliers can participate in a "Lean and Clean" review of a product or a process within their company. The GSN review team conducts a technical review of the facility and trains staff on



CNC Operator Mobile Training Lab - Courtesy of TimeWise Management Systems.

the "Lean and Clean Advantage" which combines the Lean enterprise expertise of the local MEP center with the "clean" expertise of that state's environmental programs.

In Massachusetts, Jack Healy, a very innovative MEP director, observed a significant shortage of trained CNC operators in his region. He set about developing a program to fill hundreds of positions utilizing a Mobile Outreach Skills Training and a Mobile Training Unit (MTU). In Phase I, trainees take an 8-hour skill training in the MTU which can be set up around the state or directly at a manufacturer's plant. In Phase II, trainees participate in a 60-day on-the-job training process, resulting in employment. The program is targeting ready-to-work individuals as well as students to engage them in careers in the manufacturing sector. Some Massachusetts vocational schools are now beginning to offer machining classes due to the enthusiasm generated by the program.

Possibilities abound through the MEP program. Particularly in these challenging times, your company could be benefiting. It won't cost anything to make an inquiry regarding help to implement new strategies in your business. To find out the location of your closest MEP or to read about success stories, go to www.MEP.NIST.gov. To learn about the "Lean and Clean" program, go to www.greensuppliers.gov.

Watch for MEP involvement in the 2009 AWFS® Fair College of Woodworking Knowledge Education Program! ■