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## **Florida MEP Helps Small Tampa Manufacturer Secure Grants Contributing to Business and Job Growth**

**Tampa, FL** – A key to longevity and growth for small manufacturers is the ability of these companies to tap into the highly lucrative subcontracting opportunities offered by larger manufacturers.

Automated Engineering Corporation (AEC) a small, minority owned electronics design and manufacturing company in Tampa that primarily produces circuit boards and control panels, had the skills and products larger companies needed but they lacked an important element that would help them open the doors to big contracts - ISO 9001 certification.

ISO certification is an international manufacturing standard that many large foreign and domestic contractors require their subcontractors to have because it illustrates that companies like AEC meet best practices standards recognized across the globe. While this certification can help secure lucrative contracts, going through the necessary steps, training and paperwork to achieve the certification can often be cost prohibitive for small manufacturers.

To help AEC achieve the ISO certification and tap into growth opportunities, the company contacted the Florida Manufacturing Extension Partnership (Florida MEP).

"AEC recognized they had an opportunity to grow their business and knew large and lucrative contractors like the Department of Defense and automotive industry were looking for the types of products the company produces," said Ken Studzin, Florida MEP project manager. "They also knew that their lack of ISO certification created a barrier to accessing these contracts. So we worked with them to get grants to help fund the work as well as make quality upgrades at the plant that would help them deal with the eventual influx of work from new contracts."

Many companies add a staff person specifically to work through what can be a year-long ISO certification process, but the Florida MEP can often cut that time in half and frees the manufacturer from having to hire a new person. New work can also put a strain on production processes and response time for customer orders, so the organization helps companies make changes in production processes to increase efficiency and productivity and offers training programs to management and employees.

"Our relationship with the Florida MEP group has been extremely positive and they are key to the growth we have accomplished," said David Bailey, AEC president. "All of the personnel at MEP have real life experience and know the problems associated with manufacturing processes."

In addition to helping with ISO certification, the Florida MEP worked with AEC to secure grants to produce new marketing materials and implement quality control programs auto manufacturers typically require of their subcontractors.

This collaborative effort has already produced positive results, including a 28 percent increase in sales growth in the past year. As a result of AEC's ISO Certification the company also anticipates the need for additional floor space and employees to handle the increased growth of the company.

AEC and the Florida MEP already have new projects lined up aimed at continuous improvement at the company, including Six-Sigma and Lean Manufacturing training. Six-Sigma is a data driven project aimed at eliminating product defects that has improved AEC's production yields utilizing SPC's to reduce process variation. Lean Manufacturing is a technique that utilizes simple but effective methods to identify and reduce waste, and inventories, clear shop floors and streamline production processes all with a goal of decreasing costs and increasing productivity.

"Growing companies like AEC that are striving to become world class know they have to be the most efficient and lowest cost producer of a product and realize that this is a continuous

process," added Studzin. "The Florida MEP can help small manufacturers secure grant funding to help offset costs and facilitate the training that contribute to continued success."

The Florida MEP is an affiliate of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) under the U.S. Department of Commerce. The national MEP is a network of manufacturing extension centers that provide business and technical assistance to smaller manufacturers in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Through MEP, manufacturers have access to more than 2000 manufacturing and business "coaches" whose job is to help firms make changes that lead to greater productivity, increased profits, and enhanced global competitiveness. For more information on the Florida MEP program call 321-939-4000.

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