

Susan Stabley

Published: December 13, 2004

Manufacturing at Hollywood Woodwork was reaching the end of the line.

Robert Perrotti realized that the 37-year-old manufacturer of custom-made architectural woodwork was in trouble because of its success.

The Broward County company, located off Pembroke Road west of I-95, had grown in five years from revenue of \$12 million and nearly 90 workers to \$24 million in revenue and 130 employees. Hollywood Woodwork found itself with diminishing profit margins, despite doubling its revenue.

"It's like fleeting fame," said Perrotti, VP of operations. "If you don't balance it just right, exploding growth can get out of hand."

The company could not continue to be run by what Perrotti described as "tribal knowledge." Inside the plant, veteran employees intuitively knew what needed to be done next, a method that worked for years when volume was low, he said.

But volume at Hollywood Woodwork isn't low anymore. The employee-owned company crafts woodwork for high-end hotels, condos, offices, and resorts throughout the U.S. and Caribbean. Recent clients include the Espirito Santo, Miami; Four Seasons, Exuma, Bahamas; Gaylord Texan, Dallas; and Ritz-Carlton projects in Jupiter and Grand Cayman.

Perrotti determined change "had to happen." A retooling of the company - from top to bottom and across all job types - was in order.

But funding for that kind of overhaul and retraining hadn't been budgeted. The prospect of layoffs loomed.

It was a situation that made the company perfect for the Employed Worker Training Program from WorkForce One, the Broward County agency that aids with job training programs.

As the local arm of Workforce Florida, the state's chief workforce policy agency, WorkForce One doles out federal and state dollars to assist local companies. Under the Employed Workers Training Program, WorkForce One has a pot of \$350,000 to reimburse businesses that provide training vital to retaining existing workers. Sister agencies in Miami-Dade and Palm Beach County - South Florida Workforce and Workforce Alliance, respectively - may also have funds for the Employed Worker Training Program.

Hollywood Woodwork was one of 11 companies in the past two years that was able to tap funds from the program, created in part to service manufacturing, an industry in decline in Broward County.

"Some of these companies have never invested in employee training," said Rachel Lewington, workforce development director for the South Florida Manufacturers Association. "Many simply don't have the time to get

outside the four walls of the plant and find out about these programs."

The program isn't limited to manufacturing, but is open to any for-profit, nonprofit or governmental agency. To qualify, a company has to have an existing workforce based out of a "bricks-and-mortar" building, said Mimi Coenen, business service manager for WorkForce One.

"While it is available, it's not a perfect fit for everybody," she said. Qualifying companies have to show that workers attended the training and "match" the award with their own resources, a requirement that can be satisfied by paying the salaries of employees while in training, she said.

The program won't cover classes already planned for, but it is tailored to allow the company to choose an organization or institution for training, Coenen said.

"We don't profess to be an expert on that," she said.

In the case of Hollywood Woodwork, the Florida Manufacturing Extension Partnership through the South Florida Manufacturers Association provided training. WorkForce One awarded \$23,240 for 72 employees and the company covered costs for an additional 18. The aim: making the manufacturing process "leaner," from trimming away unnecessary steps in production to moving materials closer to the people using them.

Before the overhaul, a workday at Hollywood Woodwork was, in a word, haphazard.

"Now I know where to go to get my materials," employee Carlos Chavarria said. "I don't have to waste time looking for what I am supposed to do next."

Now, Hollywood Woodwork has a color-coded job-tracking system, hanging ceiling signs that identify the locations of departments inside the plant, even a designated workspace for shipping manager Chris Freije.

"I finally got my own area," he said.

Another local company that qualified under the Employed Worker Training Program last year was FHP Manufacturing Co.'s Fort Lauderdale plant, located in a business park off Cypress Creek Road.

The 35-year-old manufacturer of water-sourced heat pumps had a recurring crisis in hiring supervisors. Anyone in charge of an assembly line needed to understand how all of the machines were operated, a learning curve that could take months, said Todd Young, VP of manufacturing.

Like Hollywood Woodwork, many in FHP's 200-employee workforce had been with the company for more than a decade. Most at FHP did not have managerial or computer training.

FHP wanted to give its employees the opportunity to advance at the plant, Young said.

Sandra Blake, head of FHP's human resources, knew exactly what needed to be learned . She even wrote up a pseudo-syllabus of necessary training skills.

"It was just a dream sheet," she said.

The dream became a reality earlier this year for a dozen workers when WorkForce One awarded FHP \$16,050 through the Employed Workers Training Program.

The workers went through an apprenticeship program with the South Florida Manufacturers Association to ready them for a supervisor role. Class work included computer courses from Broward Community College for programs like Microsoft Word and Excel.

Not long after the program concluded, a spot opened up for a supervisor. Blake said a training program graduate was tapped for the job by management after performing strongly in interviews.

The promotion came with a \$5-an-hour boost in wages.

Copyright(c) American City Business Journals Inc. All rights reserved.

You can view this article on the web at:

<http://southflorida.bizjournals.com/southflorida/stories/2004/12/13/focus5.html>