

Florida MEP: Turning Small Manufacturers into World Class Competitors

Despite a stalled economic recovery, many Florida manufacturers have strengthened their competitive position in the past two years. How have they managed to thrive despite a prolonged downturn in consumer spending that has seen thousands of firms across the country close their doors?

Many have turned to the services offered by the Florida Manufacturing Extension Partnership (Florida MEP), a statewide organization charged with turning small and mid-size manufacturers into world class competitors.

“Successful firms recognize that economic slowdowns can present hidden opportunities for growth,” said Richard Peck, chairman of the Florida MEP board of directors and president of QTM Inc., a Tampa Bay precision machining firm. “By working with Florida MEP, hundreds of manufacturers across the state have become more competitive by improving production efficiencies, developing new products, identifying new markets and increasing worker productivity. The results are measurable bottom-line impacts.”

Florida MEP is part of a nationwide network of manufacturing assistance centers created during the Reagan Administration as a public-private partnership to help manufacturers identify and implement advanced manufacturing and management technologies.

Florida MEP project managers work with companies across the state to deliver enterprise-wide lean methodologies, performance-based training, supply chain management and innovation services that can help companies streamline production processes, cut costs, integrate new technologies and develop product commercialization strategies.

The achievements of the Florida MEP are reflected in impressive economic results. The latest study, conducted by an independent third party and released in June 2011, concluded that over the past five years Florida MEP projects with 932 manufacturers were responsible for

creating 2,585 jobs and retaining another 5,236 jobs that otherwise would not exist. The projects generated \$131 million in cost savings to the companies, provided increased and retained sales of \$671 million and contributed a total of \$2.14 billion to Florida’s gross state product.

M.O.S.T.® Workforce Mobile Training Units

In one of its newest and most innovative initiatives known as the Mobile Outreach Skills Training program (M.O.S.T.®), Florida MEP has deployed mobile training units equipped with state-of-the-art computer modules to deliver customized workforce training at a manufacturer’s doorstep. These “classrooms on wheels” have provided companies with trained employees in rapid time and have launched many unemployed workers on new careers in manufacturing.

“There is a myth out there that manufacturing jobs have disappeared. The reality is that the jobs exist, but there’s a shortage of skilled people to fill many positions. The M.O.S.T.® program is designed to fill this skills gap and rapidly train workers for careers in manufacturing,” Peck said.

The M.O.S.T.® program is a fast-track, intensive skills training, recruitment, assessment and placement program that prepares unemployed and underemployed individuals, including returning veterans and minorities, for front line production jobs in less time than traditional

programs. Training is conducted in the mobile training facility, which usually is stationed at an employer’s facility. Six months of follow on services ensure a very high rate of employee retention.

Because of its mobility, the program is able to move to areas where jobs and potential employees are located. Training, which is often customized to suit the needs of the participating employer, helps reduce the time typically required for new employees to become fully productive.

North Venice-based PGT Industries, the nation’s leading manufacturer and supplier of residential impact-resistant windows and doors, began its second specialized M.O.S.T.® training session in July, having just completed a highly successful training session in June 2011. Following successful completion of the program, the graduates will all receive full-time employment with PGT Industries.



"Because the training we conducted last month was successful for PGT in identifying and training suitable candidates, we set up a second training session," said Alicia Adams, senior human resource manager for PGT Industries. "The M.O.S.T.® program has allowed us to provide the trainees hands on experience and prepare them for what they will encounter on the manufacturing floor."

Florida MEP was assisted by Suncoast Workforce on the PGT training projects. The training was part of a statewide program financed with a \$500,000 Workforce Florida Inc. grant with a goal to leverage federal, local and private-sector funding. A major contributor to the program's success has been the strong partnerships between Florida MEP and local workforce investment boards.

"The M.O.S.T.® program is vitally important to our communities and to manufacturing companies searching for skilled talent," said Peck. "The program identifies jobs prior to training, trains hard-to-serve populations for high-wage jobs with benefits, fills the existing skills gap, and has a job retention rate of 87 percent. It is a tremendous program with a strong record of success."

Lean Transformation

While the mobile training program is the newest Florida MEP initiative, the organization has long been known for its preeminence in providing lean training to small and mid-size manufacturers.

Array Connector Corporation proudly maintains that it is the most high-tech vertically-integrated manufacturer of circular connectors in the world. In the midst of the recession, the Miami-based aerospace and medical electronics parts manufacturer recognized that production efficiency improvements were essential for continued growth.

"We recognized that in order to continue to expand the business, we needed to improve our productivity and efficiency," said William McPherson, Array Connector Corp. president. "We called upon Florida MEP to assist us with this project. They expertly guided us through a process improvement program, where Lean manufacturing tools were utilized and implemented. As a direct result, Array acquired new business and hired 30 new employees."

Global pressures and increasing

customer demands require manufacturers to operate at ever higher levels of competency. To achieve world class status, companies must focus on lowering costs by reducing waste, increasing throughput, improving lead times, and maximizing customer satisfaction. Florida MEP project managers use tools such as Value Stream Mapping and Kaizen Events which focus on streamlining production processes to maximize operational throughput and improve bottom line results for their clients.

Supply Chain Management

Florida MEP Chair Peck emphasized the importance of undertaking lean training initiatives when competition is intense, including a sharp focus on supply chain management.

"In an uncertain economy businesses are looking at their supply chains very carefully. Lean helps suppliers demonstrate a commitment to quality processes and technical advances. If a manufacturer is experiencing a slowdown in orders, I encourage them to use the time productively and launch a lean training initiative that looks both up and down the supply chain," Peck stated.

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The Florida MEP works with a client's suppliers to develop an integrated, virtual, rapid response manufacturing supply chain initiative. It helps firms create a "Demand Pull" system; to identify, address and find solutions for shortages; and can match surge requirements to existing, available industrial capacity.

ISO Certifications

Advanced Technologies Group, one of Florida's leading aerospace and advanced technology firms, faced a common manufacturing challenge. The firm specializes in developing innovative technologies for aerospace and defense clients in response to challenges that defy conventional solutions. Its products include optical mass gauge sensors that can be used in zero-gravity environments, such as in satellites and rockets, and non-contacting seals that can be used in military and commercial gas turbine engines.

Advanced Technologies needed to achieve ISO 9001:2008 and AS9100 certification in order to demonstrate to clients such as NASA and the Defense Department that its processes and training could meet the highest continuous quality improvement standards.

"Attaining ISO certification can sometimes be challenging for small technology firms because of the documentation requirements," said John Justak, president of Advanced Technologies. "But the Florida MEP staff was terrific in guiding us through the process. They identified funding that was available to help support the cost of the training program and worked patiently with us to implement the management practices and documentation procedures necessary to achieve ISO certification."

Government Contracting Opportunities

Looking for new market opportunities in the midst of the recession, executives from Maxiforce attended a Miami-Dade Defense Alliance Conference, where they met Florida MEP project managers and learned of the opportunities in federal government contracting. Maxiforce's interest in the opportunity became a real commitment to the goal when Florida MEP staff identified grant funds that could be used to support the workforce training needed to become a federal Government Services Administration (GSA) schedule contractor.

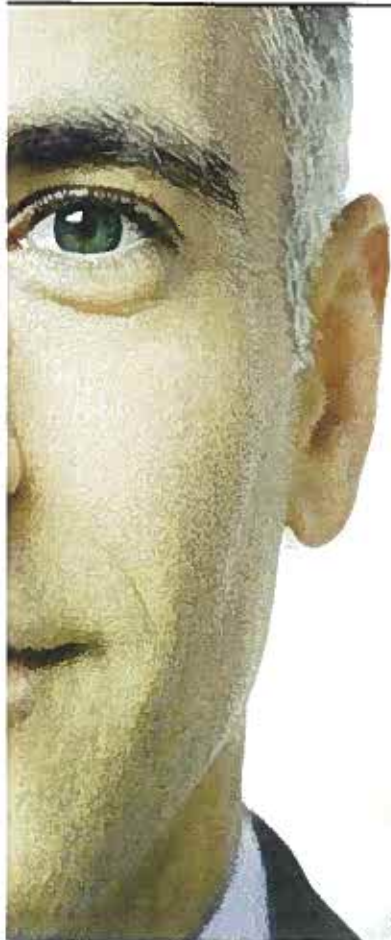
After first delivering training that

enabled Maxiforce to become ISO 9001-2008 certified, Florida MEP project managers guided the company through the multiple steps and paperwork required for GSA Schedule contracting. More than 500 Maxiforce products had to meet federal procurement requirements and earn approval at negotiated prices and specified delivery times. The company's commitment to Lean manufacturing, and the Lean workshops delivered by MEP staff, helped Maxiforce achieve the production efficiencies needed for competitive pricing and on-time delivery.

In 2010 Maxiforce achieved the distinction of becoming the second after-market parts manufacturer in the country to become a federal Government Services Administration (GSA) Schedule contractor. As a result, the company's catalogue of 527 engine replacement parts is now available online for order by more than 400,000 authorized federal purchasers worldwide.

"Maxiforce's success opened up innumerable new sales opportunities for the company. Unlike the private sector where sales plummeted during the recession, federal government purchasing remains strong. With Florida MEP assistance, Maxiforce has demonstrated how small manufacturers can target new markets for their products even in the midst of an economic downturn," said Florida MEP's Peck.

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. For more information on the Florida MEP program call 321-939-4000. ↩



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