

Forging partnerships to bolster R.I. manufacturing

BY NATALIE MYERS
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Leslie Taito's first summer job was sewing belt loops and fastening rivets on jeans for Levi Strauss & Co. in her native Tennessee.

It's a coincidence that the beginning of her job path determined where she is now – as the new executive director of RIMES, which provides business, technical and strategic advice and training to the state's small to medium-sized manufacturers.

Taito started at RIMES seven years ago, in an entry-level position, and worked her way up.

In a recent interview with PBN, Taito spoke about the state of Rhode Island's manufacturing sector, her plans for RIMES and the need for partnerships among the state's manufacturing service and advocacy groups to collectively move the industry forward.

PBN: What are your plans for RIMES?

TAITO: I've got big plans. Because we're part of a national organization, there's an MEP (Manufacturing Extension Partnership) center like RIMES in every state in the country. I'd like to see RIMES in the top 10 percent of MEP centers in the country.

PBN: What do you have to do to get there?

TAITO: We have to do the best job we can do at providing very good services to manufacturers. And we've always done that, historically ... but I want to take it to a level beyond that.

PBN: Does that mean you're going to need more funding?

TAITO: Yes, more funding. What more funding does is, it enables us to go to a wider breadth and depth in manufacturing. We could serve some of the clients we can't afford to serve now because we've had to



PBN STAFF PHOTO/STEPHANIE EWENS

LESLIE TAITO, the new executive director, wants RIMES to rank among the top 10 percent of Manufacturing Extension Partnership centers nationwide.

raise our prices in order to stay viable.

PBN: One third of your budget, or \$450,000, comes from the federal government. The rest comes from fees associated with RIMES workshops and services. Are you receiving any state funds?

TAITO: We just got a \$90,000 industry initiative grant from the State of Rhode Island for manufacturing. And I've already been talking to legislators, across the board, about the [sector's] importance. Manufacturing still has 53,000 jobs [in the Ocean State], and that's critical. We've got to pay attention. It's a major player in this economy.

PBN: How did you get the grant?

TAITO: It's out of the R.I. Department of Labor & Training. It's the manufacturing initiative industry grant. We partnered with

RIMA (the Rhode Island Manufacturers Association) to do that, because in Rhode Island, because we're so small, and there are a lot of different organizations in manufacturing, we've got to work together. We've got to figure out a way to work together on behalf of this industry.

'Manufacturing still has 53,000 jobs [in this state], and that's critical.'

PBN: RIMES has partnered with the Manufacturing Summit and RIMA. Both organizations are advocates of – and provide services for – the state's manufacturers. What do you hope to accomplish by making these partnerships?

TAITO: That we can better serve this entire industry, no matter what that looks like – and we may not know what that looks like. ... We've got some of the best consultants here. ... But there are things on the periphery of that. How do we bring [manufacturers] the latest and greatest in innovation? If

I'm getting good stuff from the federal labs, how can I push that out to the smaller manufacturing community? So if [the Manufacturing Summit and RIMA] help me get that message and get those products and services out, but they'll need something from me, I'm OK with that. Because overall, it's enhancing the industry as a whole.

PBN: There are manufacturers going out of business. Paramount Cards recently shut down, and there are others. What is your response to the thinking that manufacturing is on its way out?

TAITO: I totally disagree with the premise that manufacturing is on its way out. I go into these companies every week. We may not be getting the big wins – except in the cases like Amgen, when they start hiring 200 to 300 people; that's a great story, and I don't want to negate or diminish what they're doing there because it's fantastic – but I have small manufacturers who, maybe they're hiring one, two, three, four, maybe up to five in a year. ... It's not sexy, because three people were hired. But you look at that incremental change across the industry, the ones who are hiring two, three, four every year – that's growth.

PBN: Do you have any specific goals for the future?

TAITO: We're going through an entire strategic planning process. ... How do we look out in the marketplace and see what's new? What's innovative for us to bring back to our customers? We're doing that now. We're looking out there and saying "Is this going to be of added value?" We've got to be on search for that every day, on their behalf. That's our job. ■

INTERVIEW

Leslie Taito

POSITION: Executive director, Rhode Island Manufacturing Extension Services (RIMES)

BACKGROUND: Taito is a native of Tennessee, where she had worked primarily in sales and marketing, selling products to industrial chemical companies. On moving to Rhode Island in 1994, she became a project manager at the Greater Rhode Island Regional Employment & Training Board. Her duties included brokering training grants to companies with fewer than 100 employees. By 1998, when she became the board's acting director, she had developed both a fascination with the manufacturing industry and a robust list of contacts. She joined RIMES in 1999, as a project manager, and had risen to chief operating officer before being promoted to her current position.

RESIDENCE: North Kingstown

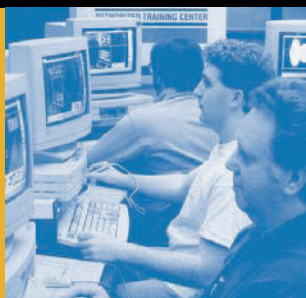
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