



Extension service boosts sales by \$17M in 4 years

By Natalie Myers, Staff Writer

Lean manufacturing, other programs touted

Rhode Island Manufacturing Extension Services, known as RIMES, is not in the habit of boasting about the fiscal value of its programs, but it found reason to brag when the results of a recent survey showed that it has boosted sales for the manufacturers it serves by about \$17 million in the last four years.

RIMES provides manufacturing solutions to about 60 of the state's small and medium-sized manufacturers per year and receives no funding from the state. But the independent survey also showed that because of the work the group has done helping its clients implement lean manufacturing and other business methods, its clients have retained more than \$50 million in sales that they otherwise would have lost.

"Those numbers look really, really good," said Leslie Taito, RIMES' chief operating officer. "It's amazing with the amount of money we're dealing with that we have that impact number."

For comparison, the Massachusetts Manufacturing Extension Partnership, which is roughly three times the size of RIMES with 30 employees and about six times the budget, helped manufacturers retain or increase sales worth a combined \$108 million last year, said its director of operations, Jack Healy.

Taito said RIMES could offer more services to more manufacturers if it had a budget as big as Massachusetts', but was hesitant to say RIMES is too small for Rhode Island's manufacturing industry.

"I think we try and service all of [the manufacturers] that we can and service them well," she said. "We have to go with what our budget dictates."

RIMES has a small staff that works double time, Taito said of RIMES' nine employees. In fact, proportionally speaking, RIMES is providing services to more companies: about 85 contracts per year, according to Taito, compared with 300 or more per year for the Massachusetts manufacturing partnership, according to Healy.

In addition, Taito noted, RIMES gets about \$450,000 of its annual operating costs from the federal government, Taito said, and the rest from fees for its workshops and services, while Massachusetts' partnership receives state aid.

Survey results, compiled by Synovate, a global market research firm, suggest RIMES workshops and services helped Rhode Island manufacturers retain 287 jobs and create 915 jobs during the past four years.

Crafford-LaserStar Technologies reports substantial improvements to its retention and creation of jobs in addition to increased revenue in the three years that the East Providence manufacturer has used RIMES' services.

The company added 20 employees, increasing its work force by 30 percent since its utilization of RIMES, said Executive Vice President James E. Gervais. Crafford-LaserStar designs and manufactures micro-welding laser workstations for the jewelry and dental industries.

RIMES' lean manufacturing and lean office workshops also helped the company increase its sales per employee by about 50 percent, Gervais said.

"From a philosophical standpoint, we are much more timely in meeting the specific configurative orders [or customized orders] of clients," Gervais said.

Prior to implementing leaner processes, it took the company three to four weeks to ship customized machinery to customers, whereas today it takes about three or four days, he said.

In addition, it takes less time to process product orders from customers, said David Braman, vice president of engineering and operations. RIMES helped the company streamline administrative tasks, reducing the waiting time for orders from about 18 days to five days.

"It has dramatically increased our bottom line," Braman said.

RIMES helps companies streamline manufacturing and administrative processes by first identifying the time between each step being performed in a process and providing suggestions on ways to reduce the time between each step, Gervais said.

Through plant design and layout suggestions, Taito said, RIMES' consultants place equipment in the best possible locations for faster, more efficient production of parts.

Taito said RIMES also provides team-building workshops and supply chain services, which help manufacturers secure government contracts and walk them through the bidding process.

The nonprofit recently started a family business assistance program, because Rhode Island's small

manufacturing companies are predominantly family-owned, which provides a unique set of challenges in regard to transferring ownership to the next generation, Taito said.

In addition to its other services, RIMES' access to a nationwide database of experts allows the nonprofit to provide advice about anything from human resources and management systems to marketing and sales, and financing and information systems, Taito said.

“Even if we can't provide a service, we always try to provide them with an option,” she said. “We always try to give them an answer or point them in the right direction.”

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