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Maine MEP Has Major Impact on Bingham Manufacturer

BINGHAM – Richard Casey, owner of AM Wood Designs Inc. of Bingham, minces no words when singing the praises of the project managers at the Maine Manufacturing Extension Partnership (Maine MEP).

“Things weren’t looking too good for us a few months ago,” Casey said, “and I’m not sure we would have made it without the efficiencies we developed after the training we received from the Maine MEP.”

A manufacturer of unfinished pine furniture, AM Wood Designs Inc. has been in business since December of 2000. The company currently employs 13 full-time and 3 part-time employees. While most of the company’s products are sold to the Mill Stores, Casey is always looking for additional customers for his products.

But Casey knew he had to do something in-house before he could even think of expanding his business or taking on new contracts. “We were having problems in our production flow,” Casey said, “and we were constantly fighting to get to zero inventory and on-time production, but we just couldn’t seem to get there.”

Knowing things just weren’t improving as he hoped – and realizing his company was having cash flow problems because of it – Casey contacted the Maine MEP.

“The project managers came right in, rolled up their sleeves and got right down to work,” Casey said. “They knew what they were talking about, were professional and quickly sold my crew on what they were hoping to accomplish.”

They went further than that, however, Casey said. “These guys actually helped us move our machinery to new locations and worked to clean up our production lines and processes.”

But MEP’s product managers did more than push machinery around. They also retrained the crew and completely changed the way Casey and his employees do their work.

“We used to do lengthy production runs,” Casey explained. “We might make 200 deacon’s benches at once. That meant making 300 backs, then moving on to 300 seats and then 300 sides, and so forth.

“That was fine three weeks down the road when it all came together, but there was a lot of wasted time and effort until we got to that point,” he said.

Also, if something went wrong in the quality process, the company would be sitting on 300 unusable parts.

MEP changed all that. Now the company produces just enough finished products to fill a pallet. That might mean 20 deacon’s benches or 30 chairs or whatever. The workers are kept busy at all times, there is no down time waiting for parts to be completed, inventory has been reduced and the company is zeroing in on on-time production.

“This is just a better way of doing things,” Casey said. “Our quality is way up, our on-time delivery numbers are up, our through-put time has decreased and shipment cycle times have decreased by 21.4 percent, from 7 days to 5.5 days.”

Best of all, Casey said he is now ready to discuss the possibility of producing goods for other wholesalers who have been clamoring for his products.

“We are always delighted to hear a success story such as this,” said Rod Rodrigue, president of the Maine MEP. “AM Wood Designs Inc. had specific problems that needed to be addressed quickly and efficiently.

“The Maine MEP product managers knew that time was definitely a factor in turning the company around and took that into consideration when initiating training and recommending changes in production.”

MEP’s project managers actually did three things for AM Wood Designs. They redid the plant layout, created work cells on the production floor and implemented a pull system for inventory that resulted in a scheduling system that limited work in progress.

“Richard Casey and his employees were open to new ideas and a new way of doing things. That always makes our job easier,” said Rodrigue, “and, in this instance, it certainly helped turn a difficult situation into a positive result.”

Casey couldn't agree more. "With the same amount of labor and increased raw-stock usage, we are producing 21 percent more gross product than we were at the start of the MEP project," he said.

While that translates into a considerable amount of money, Casey knows there is still much work to be done. "The training we received from the MEP has been invaluable," he said, "but we have a turnover of help and there's no one on the floor qualified to do that training.

"Obviously, I don't want things to slip back," he added. "The methods the MEP used made sense and I want to keep moving forward with those suggestions."

The Maine MEP is an affiliate of the 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 Maine MEP program call 1-800-637-4634.