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Biddeford Company Goes with the Flow by Going Lean

BIDDEFORD – When Tim Cook, president of Flotation Technologies, Inc., looked to find an organization to assist his company develop business practices and methods that would help make it more competitive and cost effective, his eyes fell on the Maine Manufacturing Extension Partnership.

He's glad they did.

“Maine MEP is different than other organizations and consultants,” Cook said. “They don't just come in, hand out a few pamphlets, make a few calls for you and leave.”

“The people at Maine MEP came in and were very enthusiastic. They not only told me what they had to offer and how to apply for training funds, they talked my language.”

Cook was especially impressed that the Maine MEP project managers all have manufacturing backgrounds and experience. “Everyone was very pleasant, professional, and down to earth,” he said, “and because of their experience, they had a more practical approach to business consulting. Because they have lived it, they understand the reality of companies, and their changing climates and what it takes to institute new policies.”

“We always enjoy hearing those types of comments,” said Rod Rodrigue, president of the Maine MEP. “It is a testimony to Tim Cook and his management team that they were so open to the suggestions made by our project managers and got so deeply involved in the three-day strategic assessment process.”

A world leader in the design, manufacture and marketing of deepwater buoyancy systems using high-strength Flotec™ syntactic foam and polyurethane elastomer products, Flotation Technologies, Inc., provides products for the offshore oil, oceanographic, seismic and defense markets.

In business, since 1979, the company is headquartered in Maine with sales offices in Houston and Norway.

The world's largest manufacturer of oceanographic subsurface buoys for current meter studies and global climate change research, Flotation Technologies (www.flotec.com) also provides products for underwater robotic vehicles and offshore production and drilling.

In fact, syntactic foam manufactured by Flotation Technologies was used on the underwater vehicle used by director James Cameron when he was filming “Titanic.”

“There are only five or six companies in the world that do what we do,” Cook said, “and we are the oldest continuously operating company. But we have large competitors and it is difficult to compete on a cost basis alone.”

“I decided our best chance is to compete on speed and quicker delivery,” Cook said, “so that meant I had to reduce our lead time by speeding up the process of providing quotes and flowing the product through our plant.”

That’s where the MEP project managers came in. MEP’s assessment process showed Flotation Technologies’ number one problem was throughput in the front office. “I had a very elaborate system of getting quotes out the door,” Cook said, “but being busy isn’t the same thing as productive.

“I knew I needed to embrace a Lean Technology approach in my front office because I had way too many redundancies and I had a belt-and-suspenders approach.”

Working with the management team and employees, Maine MEP set out to speed things up and ensure quotes were delivered faster, but just as accurately as under the old system.

An ISO-certified company, Flotation Technologies has plenty of processes in place to ensure mistakes don’t happen, but Cook is realistic enough to know “you have to balance speed versus making a mistake.”

On the other hand, building quotations in the computer and not having people walk paper from one desk to another, or to the other end of the office to get a signature, improved things dramatically. “We are putting out twice the number of quotes in the same amount of time,” Cook said. “It has made a huge difference.”

In addition, as a result of the assessment project, Flotation Technologies has been targeted to workforce investment funding from two U.S. Department of Labor training programs. That means during the next several months, the company will receive assistance in workforce development and training in such areas as operations, sales and marketing, and engineering.

More importantly, Rodrigue pointed out, preliminary value stream mapping outcomes, based on the Time Wise Management System, show a 30 percent reduction in time for the engineering-to-sales processing cycle at Flotation Technologies.

“All of these positive outcomes will allow Flotation Technologies to better respond to its customer needs in a very competitive global market and to withstand offshore competition over the next several years,” he said.

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.