

## Program aimed at helping small manufacturers improve processes

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ROCKFORD — On the shop floor at Leading Edge Hydraulics, even the pegboards for tools are part of the company's streamlining efforts.

Vise grips, air chuck nozzles and pliers are outlined where they hang, ensuring that each tool is in the same place every time a worker reaches for it. It's a simple way to keep employees from hunting for lost tools, but in the long run, it saves money, said Mark Podemski, vice president for development for the Rockford Area Economic Development Council.

Now, thanks to a \$60,000 Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity grant, the council is offering an eight-week course at half-price to teach manufacturers more ways to improve their production and administrative capabilities — and remain competitive in a global marketplace.

With many large-scale manufacturers already using Lean manufacturing, Six Sigma and other manufacturing methods, the demand for smaller shops to do so is increasing.

"If you're not doing it, you're at risk," Podemski said.

For Leading Edge, a 120-employee shop that fabricates hydraulic tubing, the same Lean methods have increased efficiency, shortened response times and made the company more attractive as a supplier to Caterpillar, John Deere, Komatsu and other makers of off-highway equipment.

"One of the critical things we're all faced with India and China on their cost advantages on the labor side and lack of environmental regulations is how do you compete?" said Russ Dennis Jr., vice president. "Well, the only way you can compete is on speed and quality."

On Monday, the council hosted a news conference at Leading Edge to tout its Continuous Improvement Series, which teaches Lean manufacturing techniques. Over the last three years, 270 employees from 72 companies have enrolled in the course.

Based on the Toyota Production System, Lean maps how a product moves through a factory to spot waste, such as moving a part back and forth across the shop floor. It can also be applied to administrative tasks, Podemski said.

"It's a philosophy, it's really a culture that you develop," Podemski said. "It's the idea that says no matter how good you are, you can always be better. And when you have that belief you're constantly looking for ways to improve, to eliminate waste, to reduce redundancies."

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