
Lean Manufacturing Seminar Improves Productivity, Efficiency

Appeared in the Tri-City Herald February 22, 2001

Dale Bartholomew is a believer in getting lean. Bartholomew, a retired Tri-Cities businessman who counsels local entrepreneurs, participated with 17 others in a lean manufacturing seminar at a Seattle electronics firm last year. At the beginning of the day, working in their assigned roles on a simulated, traditional manufacturing process, the team had generated only three working electronics assemblies in 20 minutes.

Gradually, the group learned how to incorporate the basic principles of lean manufacturing into the process. At the end of the day, things had improved dramatically. The team made an astonishing 157 parts in the same amount of time. "The jump in productivity and quality in that simple exercise underscored the value of lean manufacturing," said Bartholomew, who works for the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) Program, which is administered locally through Washington State University Tri-Cities Business LINKS.

Mid-Columbia manufacturers will have an opportunity to experience this transformation firsthand at an all-day training session next month in Richland. The seminar, nicknamed Lean 101, comes to the Tri-Cities courtesy of Washington Manufacturing Services (WMS) with the support of the Tri-City Industrial Development Council and Business LINKS.

"This seminar has been extremely popular, with more than 60 put on last year around the state," said Karl Webber, WMS project manager in the Spokane office. Webber will teach the March seminar, the first of its kind in the Tri-Cities area.

Lean manufacturing, according to Webber, is a systematic approach to identify and eliminate waste in all aspects of production, including inventory, processing and labor. Industry giants such as Boeing have embraced the concept as a way to win market share from overseas competitors. Boeing is reducing inventory, creating production cells so people work together on assemblies instead of moving them around the factory, adopting just-in-time inventory and using visual cues and pull systems so the flow of parts and assemblies becomes self-activating.

WMS teaches similar principles for small and medium-sized businesses with fewer than 500 employees. At the seminar, participants are introduced to the concepts and then taken through several rounds of a simulated manufacturing process so they can see what works. During the simulations, measurements are made of on-time delivery, cycle times, units produced and flaw rates. These are converted to financial statements. Typically, production cycles show losses at the beginning, which turn to profits later in the day.

"Companies adopting lean manufacturing can achieve outstanding results with minimal expense," Webber said. He states impressive statistics: manufacturers often increase productivity by 50 percent, reduce floor space by 30 percent and reduce inventory by 70 percent.

"The course is designed as an overview that gives people an idea of the kinds of changes they could make," Webber said. But he also realizes that one eight-hour session is not enough for most companies to implement the principles in their own work environments. For these firms, Webber and his colleagues can follow up with site-specific consultation. "We go to their location and facilitate the change for them, not just teaching them but helping them do it until it's integrated into their processes," he said. Companies pay WMS or its contractors to conduct these customized projects. Fees vary based on the scope of work required.

Webber emphasized that lean manufacturing is not intended to eliminate jobs, but to keep them in the United States. "We don't work with companies looking to downsize," Webber said. "We're trying to help companies increase productivity and, in turn, increase their capacity to take on more work." When on site, Webber and his colleagues typically work directly with the production floor personnel. "We teach them a different way to look at their operations and let them come up with their own solutions," he said. "Employees appreciate being able to get a lot more done with a lot less effort."

Washington Manufacturing Services is a not-for-profit organization designed to help the state's manufacturers improve their competitiveness. The organization is funded partially by the state and federal government and by providing training and services to businesses.

The Lean Manufacturing Seminar is on Thursday, March 22, at WSU Tri-Cities Consolidated Information Center, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., with lunch provided. The cost is \$299 per person, and attendance is limited to 23 people. To register, or for more information, contact local WMS representative Gary A. White, 509.372.7614 or gawhite@tricity.wsu.edu.