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Grant helps Redmond business boost productivity

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With a grant obtained through Lake Washington Technical College's Job Skills Program (JSP), Redmond's Interior Woodworking Specialists (IWS) have significantly streamlined their operations while they design and build custom cabinets, bars and other fixtures for the restaurant industry.

JSP is a state legislative program to enhance the growth of Washington's economy and increase employment opportunities. Participation is usually geared to areas where unemployment is high and people lack job skills. In the case of IWS, most employees have been with the company a long time but vocational apprenticeships aren't as abundant as they once were, explained Tracey Hepner, who co-owns IWS with Doug Hepner and their partner Dan Cummings.

"Many people here came to us directly from high school, 10 to 15 years ago, and we have trained them. A lot of high schools have dropped shop classes and now there's so much technology in the process. The American Woodwork Institute is trying to put kids back into learning the art," she stated.

But IWS' more immediate goal when it entered into the JSP partnership was to embrace a "lean manufacturing" model that decreases clutter in the workplace, helps employees manage time and resources more effectively and therefore, boosts both productivity and wages.

"Washington's Manufacturing Services goes in and helps manufacturing companies look at flow of product and how it goes through a shop," said Hepner. They teamed with Lake Washington Technical College (LWTC) which provided the grant.

IWS had already worked with Washington Manufacturing for one group of lean manufacturing trainees and needed more money to complete "phase two" of the lean manufacturing makeover.

"It was a grueling process," Hepner commented, since they needed to change the ways people had been doing things for a long time. "We took a 10-foot base cabinet and broke it down into every step of how we build it ... tore it down to nuts and bolts from the time of order to the end product."

Using old practices, it was taking employees at IWS 56 hours to build one of those cabinets.

"Teams came in representing the office, receiving and assembly and broke it down per nut and bolt. They came up with an action plan, with (input from) people who've done this before. ... We got the process down to 20 hours," Hepner marveled.

That's because there's now a logical flow of materials, everyone knows what their job is and everyone knows what they can be doing to fill periods of downtime, she noted.

Lean manufacturing isn't a new concept — it's been successfully adopted by major corporations such as Toyota and Boeing, said Hepner. But it can make a real difference at smaller businesses, too.

"By 'cleaning house,' you might go from 30 employees to 28 but have better wages and skills for those people," she continued. "And we've been here 12 years. Every time we grew, we just took on whatever space was available because we didn't have the luxury of custom-building to our specifications. Doing this a long time ago would have saved us a lot of money."

IWS' clients have included the Schwartz Brothers restaurants, Duke's Chowder House, Anthony's Home Port and various casinos. They're currently installing furnishings at a new El Gaucho location in Bellevue.

Hepner pointed out, "This is a very small niche market because of the specific needs of the restaurants and knowing all the materials well. Whatever people are dreaming about at night, we have to come up with the designs. There is extreme deadline pressure when they're planning a grand opening."

In addition to IWS, three other businesses in the region have participated in the JSP program through LWTC this year. They are Strasser Woodenworks in Woodinville, Silicon Mechanics in Bothell and Bowman Manufacturing in Arlington.

Dave Cunningham, LWTC workforce training and grants director, remarked, "The JSP training was transformational for these four companies, helping all of them turn around their productivity and efficiency. This was a real success story for everyone involved and it will have a big impact economically."

LWTC, which has campuses in Kirkland and in Redmond, managed the one-year training program for the companies, including the state-funded grant money which totaled more than \$300,000 and benefited more than 200 employees. For more information about the JSP, contact Dave Cunningham at (425) 739-8269 or dave.cunningham@lwtc.edu.

For information about Interior Woodworking Specialists, visit www.interiorwoodworking.com.

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