

The State of the Manufacturing Extension Partnership: Mixed Results

Part one of a three-part series.



The Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP) is a nationwide network of resources transforming manufacturers to compete globally, supporting greater supply chain integration, and providing access to technology for improved productivity. MEP is a nationwide network of not-for-profit centers in nearly 350 locations nationwide, whose sole purpose is to provide small and medium-sized manufacturers with the help they need to succeed. The centers, serving all 50 states and Puerto Rico, are linked together through the Department of Commerce's National Institute of Standards and Technology. Centers are funded by federal, state, local and private resources to serve manufacturers. That makes it possible for even the smallest firms to tap into the expertise of knowledgeable manufacturing and business specialists all over the United States. These specialists are people who have had experience on manufacturing floors and in plant operations.

Each center works directly with area manufacturers to provide expertise and services tailored to their most critical needs, which range from process improvements and worker training to business practices and applications of information technology. Solutions are offered through a combination of direct assistance from center staff and outside consultants. Centers often help small firms overcome barriers in locating and obtaining private-sector resources. Since the beginning of MEP, it has assisted over 149,000 firms.

MEP locations offer a variety of products and services including:

Lean: A Lean Enterprise produces more with existing resources by eliminating non-value added activities.

Strategic Management: Strategic Management - planning and executing business strategies through people, processes and technology - is a powerful competitive weapon that too few executives use

to their advantage

Quality: Quality Systems encompass everything from product design to distribution of finished products.

Growth Planning: Growth planning focuses the company on what it needs to do to expand profitably, based on innovations in product, process, service and/or business model.

Environmental: MEP consultants help companies avoid wasting materials and energy.

Human Resources / Organizational Development: MEP recognizes the impact that people, culture, and skills have on the competitive abilities of small and medium-sized manufacturers.

Despite being a tremendous source for teaching Lean Manufacturing principles, including continued process improvements, all MEPs are not created equal. This is the first in a three part series about the MEPs in the Midwest for *Manufacturing & Technology*. The results of this investigative report are mixed. Consistency between the MEP centers is difficult to find. Each location offers different values, talents, and pricing. Some of the services and business paradigms are exceptional, forward thinking, progressive, and extraordinarily worthwhile. Unfortunately, all the news is not good. If potential clients of MEPs were treated as inefficiently as this journalist in getting answers about the programs and services available, there is little question why the MEP program needs to go back and beg the federal government (\$100+ million for 2006) to keep funding their operation.

Some MEP Innovators:

TechSolve (www.techsolve.org) based in Cincinnati, Ohio has developed some exceptional programs for manufacturers in the region. Recognizing that a one-time project for a manufacturing client is too limited and contradicts the organizations concept of on-going improvements, this MEP has developed a membership program that is valued at more than \$14,000 annually.

The membership includes participation in the Manufacturing Leadership Series. These events, featuring representatives

from some well-recognized manufacturers in the country, are a forum for progressive manufacturing leadership development and shared learning. Held on a bi-monthly basis, the Manufacturing Leadership Series provides a real value to members...the opportunity to learn from industry leaders such as General Electric and Boeing, while also hearing from small and mid-sized companies applying "world-class" techniques to their businesses everyday! Attendance at the series is included in a company's annual membership fee. Upcoming events include the March 23rd Amano Cincinnati Plant Tour and April 27th IndustryWeek columnist John Brandt.

The second aspect of the TechSolve membership program is the Lean Enterprise Diagnostic. The program was designed to provide members an in-depth snapshot of their organization without the investment of a lengthy assessment. Common uses for the Diagnostic include:

- Annual internal benchmarking
- Initial step in annual planning process
- Internal alignment/consensus around key issues
- Prioritization of improvement projects

Facilitated by a TechSolve manufacturing specialist, participants are lead through a series of questions that gauge effectiveness in 16 critical areas. The agenda for the day-long process includes a management briefing and company introduction, a plant tour, an assessment interview and data collection, recommendation development, and presentation of the assessment and recommendation reports.

Another important aspect to the TechSolve membership program, and unique to the MEP system nationwide, is their Knowledge Center, which provides members a unique and valuable on-line information, research, and answer service. The system consists of searchable knowledge bases, expert resources to answer questions, and includes such features as patent searches.

The MEP is proud to note that it is "Making a Difference" for manufacturers. In a new report, a state-by-state analysis of the impact of the program is detailed. It can be found at:

[http://www.mep.nist.gov/making-differ-](http://www.mep.nist.gov/making-differ-ence-Jan2006.pdf)

[ence-Jan2006.pdf](http://www.mep.nist.gov/making-differ-ence-Jan2006.pdf). It certainly points to the good deeds and accomplishments of the organization. Now if only they were equally forthcoming about their shortcomings. Perhaps MEPs are adopting TOC (Theory of Constraints) choosing their bottleneck: customer responsiveness.

The second and third part in this series will be featured in the next two issues of *Manufacturing & Technology*.

About the Author

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