

Value to Wood

by Roland Baumeister

Switching to lean: Pushing production and profit through the roof



Patrick Byrns, owner of SBC Case Industries Ltd., knew that the best way for his company to implement lean manufacturing techniques was to find an expert the company could work with.

The owner of Saskatoon's SBC Case Industries Ltd., Patrick Byrns, was already sold on the potential benefits offered by the lean manufacturing approach before participating in a multiple module lean training program. However, he needed help to raise the knowledge level of shop employees and to implement the concepts on the shop floor first. That's where the technical

expertise of an outside resource really paid off.

"Training is always an issue when attempting to implement a new system," says Byrns. "Participating in the modules was an affordable way for me to give my main people an immersion into lean techniques."

The company uses wood as one of its building materials to manufacture reusa-

ble shipping and carrying cases, often for sensitive equipment. It's been in business for 21 years and has 16 employees.

One of the tools that was used as part of the process of helping SBC plan, implement and make the transition from manufacturing in batches to single piece, continuous flow manufacturing was value stream mapping (VSM).

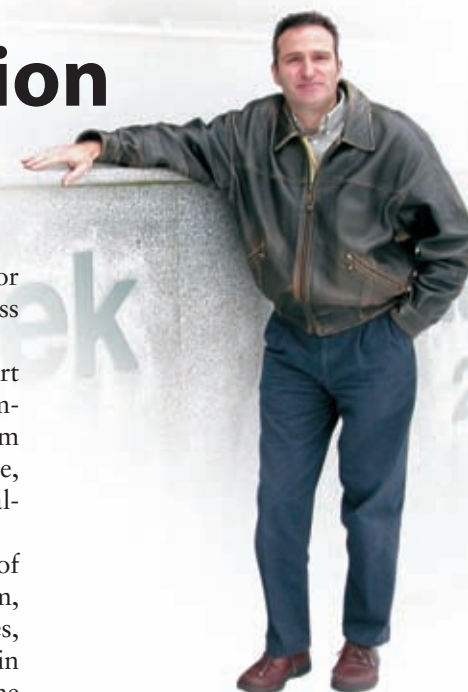
This tool creates a careful analysis of a company's current production system, looking at cycle times, changeover times, number of operators required, work in process inventory, and machine uptime to identify production bottlenecks. It is done as one of the modules, and is particularly useful because it is customized since every business is unique in how it manufactures its products.

When lean concepts were implemented at SBC Case Industries – as part of its future state value stream map – Byrns says the results were incredible.

"We have relocated to smaller premises and are putting out more production in a smaller space," says Byrns. The company moved from a building with a main floor and mezzanine area consisting of about 18,000 sq. ft. to a building with a single level consisting of 8,000 sq. ft., and has quadrupled production output in the process.

"Instead of having large production lines with batches flowing through, we find now that we basically have small production units that are single piece flow cells," says Byrns. "We can replicate those any time we need to with very low investment."

The company implemented its first single piece flow cell in March, and what resulted was that it was suddenly able to respond very quickly to urgent customer needs. With its order backlog rapidly dropping off because so much more product was heading out the door, the company launched a new sales strategy in April to seek out business that the company couldn't afford to pursue in the



past. The result was immediate.

"We are now absolutely buried," says Byrns. "Normally, summer is a slow time for us. However, we have had more of a backlog in commercial work since May than we have ever had before, and it seems to be staying that way."

Even with less floor space, the company now has multiple streams of lower to higher end product being manufactured right next to each other. The company has also hired more employees, and anticipates hiring more in the near future.

The transition has not meant a huge investment in new equipment. Byrns says realistically, it has meant purchasing more low-tech tools, but using employees more wisely.

"One of the challenges for us was to try to integrate some of our automated equipment to support single piece flow," he says. "I'm not saying that there isn't room for automation, but you quickly learn that it's not the area to focus on because it's all about throughput and bottlenecks. Generally, dealing with those issues is achieved by using your people better." **WW**

Roland Baumeister is the manager of value-added manufacturing at Forintek Canada, a company with 25 years of experience providing technical support to the wood products industry in Canada. He can be reached at 604-222-5672, or roland@van.forintek.ca.