

State partnership fans out to help manufacturers find ways to grow

In Rochester area, NextCorps works with small to midsize firms to overcome obstacles

By **MATTHEW REITZ**

A statewide program aimed at boosting the manufacturing industry is helping local manufacturers thrive, connecting companies to supportive resources and aiding in the identification and solving of a wide range of problems.

The New York State Manufacturing Extension Partnership, or MEP, is a network of organizations working to advance technological innovation and commercialization in the state. The 11 nonprofit organizations in the state MEP provide innovation services to small and midsize manufacturers to develop products, create prototypes and improve processes.

“Anything to help the manufacturers stay more competitive,” says Elena Garuc, executive director of FuzeHub, the Albany-based organization that coordinates the statewide MEP. “The MEP networks are really dedicated to helping manufacturers become more competitive and to make sure manufacturing is a thriving industry.”

NextCorps is the state’s designated MEP center for the Rochester region. Annette Brenner, NextCorps’ client development manager, said the organization works with manufacturers in Monroe County and the surrounding eight counties to help small to midsize manufacturers grow jobs and revenues.

“At the end of the day the services that these MEP centers like NextCorps provide help companies create and retain jobs, increase profits and save time and money,” Garuc said.

FuzeHub marketing manager Elizabeth Rivera said the MEP programs, which can be found in all 50 states and Puerto Rico, were created in the late 1980s and early 1990s due to increasing competitive pressures from industrializing countries overseas and a recognition that it is more difficult for smaller manufacturers to keep up with the necessary advancements to stay competitive and viable.

Regional MEP centers, such as NextCorps, take “a hands on approach” to determine what manufacturers need to



Mike Mandina

develop and grow a business, Garuc said, with regional representatives visiting the manufacturing facility and identifying what a company may need to improve.

“We like to call them the boots on the grounds,” Garuc said of the regional MEP centers. “They have the ability to take manufacturers through many different growth solutions and also connect them to the regional and state ecosystem.”

MEP centers throughout the state were able to create and/or retain about 3,700 jobs, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce, while boosting or retaining nearly \$400 million in sales and saving more than \$49 million in operational costs. Companies also made more than \$129 million in new capital investments as a result of projects related to MEP centers.

Manufacturing can include anything from a winery and brewery to an aerospace company, Brenner said, adding there are more than 2,000 manufacturing

companies in NextCorps’ nine-county service area. Projects can be “all across the map,” Brenner said, noting a brewery would need very different services than a precision machining company providing parts to the aerospace industry.

Formerly known as High Tech Rochester, NextCorps’ MEP center is just one part of the organization, Brenner said. Other NextCorps programs can

help bring an entrepreneur’s idea into a fully developed prototype, with the MEP center able to assist with developing production methods and the later stages of manufacturing and distribution.

NextCorps’ MEP center is typically involved with around 150 ongoing projects at any one time, Brenner said, finishing roughly 200 each year for more than 100 different companies.

Gorbel Inc., a 40-year-old manufacturer of ergonomic lifting and safety products firm, is one of the many companies NextCorps has assisted in recent years. About five years ago the company decided to take existing technology and apply it to physical rehabilitation and form Gorbel Medical, which is now known as Gorbel Rehabilitation.

Gorbel Rehabilitation general manager Betty Dolce said the company’s product is “used for people who have to relearn how to walk, are at risk for falls and need body weight support.” NextCorps has supported Gorbel in a handful of different ways, Dolce said, and the MEP center also connected the company with outside support for “everything from getting tooling done to software development.”

Software development is one of the biggest areas the MEP center helped Gorbel with, Dolce said, noting the development of a user interface “has been a huge project” for company. Without a user-interface, the company didn’t really have a product, Dolce said, adding the interface that was developed has been “critical to the success of the device.”

The user-interface is how a therapist controls the rehabilitation device, Dolce said, calling it “everything they see”

percent, Dolce said.

“It’s amazing to me how many opportunities the MEP program has brought to us for funding of different projects simply because we have a quarterly conversation with them about what it is that we’re thinking about doing,” Dolce said, calling the MEP center an “incredible” and “important partner.”

Optimax Systems Inc. President Mike Mandina said the MEP centers are an important way to connect manufacturers to resources and assist with a variety of other projects, including improving efficiency and sustainability. When the MEP center doesn’t have the resources in-house to solve a problem, Mandina said they are able to connect companies with organizations and people who can help.

“MEPs are helpful and I think they’re a good thing for our region,” Mandina said. “Optimax is a growing company that finds itself with new challenges as we grow, and the MEP is one of our first calls as we find ourselves in situations we’ve never encountered before. They almost always can help us directly or direct us to someone who can help us.”

Located in the Wayne County town of Ontario, Optimax manufactures and tests precision optics for a number of technologies. Founded in 1991, Optimax produces lenses that end up in a variety of different markets and applications, including aerospace, defense, consumer electronics and medical devices.

Optimax products can be found in various satellites in space, and Mandina said the company’s lenses have been included in NASA’s Mars Exploration Rover and the New Horizons spacecraft that launched in 2006 and pointed cameras, spectrometers and other sensors at Pluto and its moons in 2015.

Over the years the MEP center has helped Optimax with a number of different projects, Mandina said, including finding ways to reducing costs and improve manufacturing methods. More recently, the MEP center provided funding for additional leadership and technical skill training.

“They make it easier to do and make it so we can have more people participate with the funding support that they’re able to acquire,” Mandina said.

Optimax employs more than 300 individuals, Mandina said, and the company is beginning an expansion that will almost double its manufacturing space and likely add hundreds of people to the workforce over the next five years.

Matthew Reitz is a Rochester-area freelance writer.

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when controlling the device.

“It was an essential part of the project and it is a key function, or a key feature, of our overall system,” Dolce said. “We had engineers who could do the software engineering inside the device, but we didn’t have anybody with the capabilities to create that user-interface.”

Through the MEP center Gorbel was able to secure funding to offset the costs of the more than \$100,000 project by 10