

ANN ARBOR NEWS 1/31/13

Lean practices: Michigan businesses get help from MSU students to become more competitive

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EAST LANSING — Several Michigan companies are looking beyond their executive leadership and outside consultants for advice on how to become more globally competitive.

They're bringing in students from Michigan State University for fresh ideas on making their operations more lean and efficient.

The project is the brainchild of Bill Demmer, CEO of Lansing-based manufacturer Demmer Corp. He donated \$5 million to MSU to create the John and Marnie Demmer Center for Business Transformation, which launched in late 2011.

Since then, more than 20 undergraduate and graduate business and engineering students have dove into projects at about eight companies throughout the state, including Lear Corp. in Roscommon, Emergent Biosolutions Inc. in Lansing and Saginaw-based Mistequay Group Ltd. They've also worked on improving operations within some state government departments.

"We had been using



COURTESY

Mihir Khare, a student at MSU's Broad Graduate School of Management, works with an employee at Lear Corp. in Roscommon to improve manufacturing line operations.

consultants' help from all over the country assisting us in our business transformation. As our relationship with the MSU back yard," Bill Demmer said in

an MSU Today article when the center was announced.

The center focuses on promoting "lean" practices that seek the most value in shortest time with the least amount of resources. Students learn about these concepts from the center's Managing Director Jim Manley, who has worked for Delphi Automotive and General Motors Co.

While some universities offer lean training programs for corporate executives on campus, MSU takes a missionary approach, Manley said.

"We go out to where the people are ... work right beside them, in their environment, to teach them methodologies," he said.

Last semester, student Carl Ream helped Grand Rapids-based Van Eerden Foodservice Co. rework its warehouse layout to be more efficient. This semester, he is building a forecasting model for raw material needs at Schafer Hardwood Flooring Co. in Tecumseh.

"It gives these companies exposure to these ideas they may not have had before, a new fresh set of eyes to walk around the manufacturing layout or the company and see where it needs improvement," said Ream, a 21-year-old supply

chain management senior.

Schafer Hardwood Flooring is a small manufacturer with about 40 employees that distributes throughout North America.

"The opportunity for these students to make significant changes and see them implemented has been a very positive and rewarding experience for both the student and for our company," said owner Scott Schafer.

Ream said it's a great way to learn by applying classroom concepts in the real world. He said his experience with the Demmer Center helped him land a full-time job with Steelcase in Grand Rapids once he graduates.

Students are paid through the center, which receives funding from the Demmer grant and from some participating companies.

Lear Corp., a Southfield-based automotive supplier, hopes the program will help deepen its relationship with MSU.

"It serves somewhat as a farm system for Lear and provides opportunities for students in the program," said Ryan Salinger, director of cost technology optimization for Lear in North America.