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A focus on next-generation manufacturing

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The manufacturing firm of the future will look very different than it does today.

That's the view of business leaders and company owners such as Mary Isbister, president of Mequon-based General MetalWorks Corp., a metal fabricator that makes highly engineered products for a variety of industries. Isbister, a strong advocate for manufacturing, serves on Milwaukee 7's Next Generation Manufacturing Council and on the board of the Wisconsin Manufacturing Extension Partnership.

"Five or 10 years from now, we're not going to be producing the same products we are today," she says. "Manufacturers must be innovative, find new ways to add value and create products that are not easily replicated by low-wage overseas competitors. It's a whole new ball game."

In this new ball game, Isbister's company is hitting a lot of home runs. General MetalWorks has doubled its revenue in the past five years from \$6 million to \$12 million, created jobs and expanded its operations by acquiring a new facility in Slinger.

Isbister attributes General MetalWork's success to a transformation that started in late 2002, when the company realized it needed a long-term competitive advantage to compete in intensely competitive global markets. "We ultimately decided to focus on faster turnaround times, smaller lot sizes and highly engineered products," she recalls.

Lean manufacturing was deployed to attack waste and inefficiency. Lead times were cut in half, and today, General MetalWorks is able to turn around orders for rapid prototyping on timelines once unthinkable. Employee productivity tripled, which opened up capacity for new business. The lean journey continues, with employees immersed in the philosophy and encouraged to be active participants in the company's success. State-of-the-art equipment has helped the company transition into more complex, highly engineered products.

General MetalWorks is an excellent example of next-generation manufacturing - firms that are lean, innovative, globally focused, environmentally aware and able to attract and retain highly skilled workers. The question that we face as a state and region is how do we replicate this success and create an infrastructure to support and strengthen Wisconsin's 10,000 small and midsize manufacturers as they make this critical transition?

Keep in mind that Wisconsin has a preponderance of small manufacturing firms (fewer than 100 employees)

that often have limited resources to implement the changes demanded by today's global marketplace.

Clearly, this is no small task, but the good news is we're moving in the right direction. Forbes magazine ranks Milwaukee fifth on a list of the nation's "Top 10 Up-and-Coming Tech Cities," citing Johnson Controls and Rockwell Automation as innovative, technology-driven manufacturers.

Milwaukee 7's Next Generation Manufacturing Council is working to improve manufacturing capabilities and make the region's manufacturing base more technology-driven, innovative, lean and skilled. At the state level, Gov. Jim Doyle's recently announced Next Generation Manufacturing Initiative is designed to help small manufacturers become more competitive, which will allow the Wisconsin Manufacturing Extension Partnership to expand the number of manufacturers it assists with lean and growth strategies.

On Wednesday, more than 750 manufacturing leaders from across the state will converge in Milwaukee for Wisconsin's Manufacturing Matters! Conference, where next-generation manufacturing will be high on the agenda. Thirty workshops will provide fresh insights and best practices on lean manufacturing, growth strategies, new product development and environmental performance.

Wisconsin has a strong and vibrant

\$47.2 billion manufacturing sector that employs roughly 500,000 people. Robust growth in international exports - up 11.8% in 2007 to a record \$19 billion - underscores enormous opportunities for the state's manufactures to sell products to a fast-growing consumer population around the world.

Our commitment to help small and midsize firms make the transition to next generation manufacturing will allow the sector to create jobs and wealth for years to come.

Mike Klonsinski is executive director of the Wisconsin Manufacturing Extension Partnership, a private, nonprofit organization committed to the growth and success of Wisconsin manufacturers (www.manufacturingmatters.org).

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