

Manufacturing make-over reaps rewards for Albuquerque business

Written by Claudia Infante For N.M. Finance Report
Friday, 28 June 2019 06:56



Special Projects Coordinator, N. M. Manufacturing Extension Partnership

C. Aaron Velasquez knew it was time to modernize the equipment and processes his family's metal-plating business had used for four decades, but he wasn't sure where to start.

An industry contact introduced him to New Mexico Manufacturing Extension Partnership, a nonprofit that trains manufacturers in lean principles, value-stream mapping and other methodologies that help businesses increase profitability and competitiveness.

Theta Plate, a second-generation, family-owned Albuquerque-based business, specializes in electroplating of precious metals for industrial and commercial uses, such as friction reduction and conductivity enhancement in electrical and computer components and applications that improve the radiance of costume jewelry.

Much of the equipment used at Theta Plate was as old as the company, and manufacturing processes were geared to that legacy machinery. Over the decades, environmental laws had changed, forcing the company to spend precious financial resources meeting more stringent standards for wastewater discharge.

Last fall, MEP consultant Jeff Abrams visited Theta Plate to blueprint the manufacturing process and see where efficiencies could be introduced - a process called value stream mapping.

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Abrams recommended replacing the large tanks that supply water for rinsing and cleaning metals multiple times during production with smaller tanks. He also suggested reorganizing the shop floor to reduce the distance workers traveled during plating, to ensure that incompatible chemicals were stored at proper distances from one another, and to place receiving, inspection and shipping areas closer together.

To minimize the expenses involved in treating discharge water to city standards, the company researched the costs of reclamation equipment that would allow it to become a zero-discharge facility and reduce its water use and disposal costs. The ultimate goal was to reduce the company's regulatory requirements and bring more predictability to its operations so it could compete for bigger business.

"I can't believe that we developed such an elegant system," Velasquez said once the company moved forward with the suggested changes.

Jessica Velasquez, his daughter-in-law who works at the company with her husband, praised NM MEP and the results of the MEP-Theta Plate collaboration, which allowed the company to streamline its processes and improve quality control.

"Without these programs, we would have been stuck doing the same old thing we've been doing for the past 30 years," she said. "We have the opportunity now to partner with one of the largest international firms providing electroplating chemistry worldwide. We're positioned to make that partnership happen because of the expertise we received."

And that effort has translated into more jobs. "Since we started working with NM MEP, we've been able to add one full-time position to our little shop, and one part-time position. We have been able to acquire half a dozen new clients outside New Mexico."

The prospects keep getting brighter. The new partnership promises to add as many as 20 new jobs to the workforce, she said, "and that makes a real impact on people's lives."

For more information about New Mexico MEP, visit <https://newmexicomep.org/>. To learn

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more about Theta Plate, go to <https://www.thetaplate.com/>.

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