

The Inside Track

by Michael Mecham

Suppliers Find Strength In A Network

Connecticut Connections

Small-size suppliers garner big rewards via a coalition

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Specialty suppliers—shops that make gears, fan cases, ducting, switches and the like—are often so busy putting out today’s job and looking for tomorrow’s that they have little time to tackle such issues as workforce training or process improvement. Who can afford to set up classes in shop math or blueprint reading for a handful of workers? And how many suppliers with 75 employees have their own kaizen specialist?

In Connecticut, the 64 members of Aerospace Components Manufacturers found the answer by banding together. ACM was formed in 1999 by just six companies that saw aerospace changing so fast they worried about keeping up. Jobs were moving to the low-cost South. The industry’s biggest primes, such as Hartford’s United Technologies Corp. with its Pratt & Whitney, Sikorsky and Hamilton Sundstrand aerospace business units, were increasingly collaborating with overseas partners and having to fulfill offset requirements.

“We were formed initially to help each other and collaborate on workforce training,” says ACM Executive Director Allen Samuel. But in a broader sense, the Connecticut manufacturers (plus some in southern Massachusetts) began viewing membership as a “survival issue,” he says. For the first five years, Connecticut’s Economic Community Development Department provided support funding, reflecting the state government’s commitment toward retaining good-paying jobs.



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“We have a natural aerospace cluster here and that’s a rare thing, says Doug Rose, president of Aero Gear, an ACM founder. Aero Gear produces gears and gearboxes, such as this gas turbine accessory gearbox (above), in Windsor, mainly for jets and helicopters. When Rose helped found ACM his immediate concern was building basic

shop-floor skills for an expanding workforce.

By pooling demand, the association's members found that community colleges were willing to bring classes directly to their work sites. Weekly classes can be scheduled in the mid-afternoon so workers from both first and second shifts can benefit, says Samuel.

As members interacted, trust increased. "The old thinking was that the guy in the next town was the competitor," says Rose. "The new thinking is we have to compete against Poland."

Confidence brought cooperation and more work. "It's a leader-follower task," explains Chris DiPentima, president of Pegasus Manufacturing in Middletown, a fabricator of tube assemblies, and air and hydraulic flow lines for engines and airframes. "We can't do all the special processes—plating, heat treating—so we off-load some," he says. "And we get work back. The key is that [ACM] is a very open, honest organization, which is kind of ironic because you're sitting across from some of your competitors."

For Volvo Aero Connecticut, which joined ACM three years ago, membership has brought synergies for collaboration among similar and dissimilar businesses, says Sales Manager Bruce Fiedorowicz. "ACM is a supply-chain tool that allows us to access special processes in machining capability that we don't have in-house."

Volvo Aero came to Connecticut 15 years ago when it bought out Aero-Craft. Its factories in Newington and New Britain are Volvo's centers of excellence for fan cases and major structures.

"Having someone to kick ideas around with and learn from" is a great advantage, says John Kornegay, president of Kaman Precision Products in Middletown. "It's very much a two-way street and there is huge value in that." Part of Kaman Aerospace, Precision Products makes joint programmable fuses for missiles and bombs.

In the late 1990s, as prime aerospace manufacturers turned to lean manufacturing and the kaizen concept of continuous improvement, some suppliers wondered if those were merely buzzwords. They have no doubts now. "There's little question that if you haven't done something with lean, you are simply not going to be accepted," says Samuel.

But top kaizen consultants can be expensive, so splitting costs has given ACM members an advantage, Rose says.