

Productivity Increases Convince Cobham Surveillance to Implement Lean Enterprise-wide

Nashua communications manufacturer demonstrates the value of taking lean beyond the shop floor

Nashua, NH – Communications manufacturer [Cobham Surveillance](#) understands the truth of the old adage that nothing sells like success. After the company doubled the output of its transmitter/receiver production line by implementing a lean initiative, other departments in the company's Nashua plant eagerly embraced lean initiatives. The results began to cascade.

From design and development to customer service to accounts payable, business unit after unit initiated lean projects. Now the company has targeted a new goal – improving its new product introduction process to reduce the time-to-market of new products from 90 days to 30 days. For some businesses, a productivity improvement of more than 100 percent might seem improbable. For Cobham Surveillance, dramatic improvements from its lean project teams are nothing less than expected.

“Cobham Surveillance demonstrates how a culture of lean, once it takes hold, can transform a company,” said Zenagui Brahim, director of operations for the New Hampshire Manufacturing Extension Partnership ([NH MEP](#)), which has guided Cobham Surveillance in implementing lean.

“The nature of the life-critical products Cobham Surveillance produces for military and law enforcement customers requires the highest degree of attention to quality and performance. Lean initiatives have helped the company reduce its defect rates, enhance customer satisfaction and improve its bottom-line returns. The company's achievements are an impressive testament to the value of lean,” Brahim stated.

Cobham Surveillance, formerly known as DTC Communications, began its relationship with NH MEP several years ago, when the company contacted NH MEP for assistance in obtaining ISO 9001-2000 certification. As a designer, developer and manufacturer of miniature wireless communications equipment used by law enforcement, intelligence and defense agencies, the company recognized the need for ISO certification in order to successfully compete for government contracts.

NH MEP helped DTC Communications successfully obtain ISO 9001-2000 certification in 2007. When the Nashua manufacturer's parent company subsequently directed its subsidiaries to implement Lean, Cobham's management knew they could turn to NH MEP for assistance.

Cobham's Director of Quality, Dennis Goodman, notes that one of the keys to the company's success was the message NH MEP Project Manager Dave Hess emphasized from the very first meeting.

“David stressed that lean is a discipline for the entire company not just for manufacturing,” said Cobham's director of quality. “When we did the first Le102 events, we made sure they were company-wide. Everyone was able to see first-hand how lean tools could be applied to their specific job.”

The Le102 is Lean Training for the Job Shop which introduces basic lean terms and tools and shows how they can enhance processes in manufacturing and outside the shop floor to improve the way paperwork and product flows through the system – from sales and design through manufacturing.

Cobham employees received instruction in a variety of lean tools and techniques including 5S, kaizen, value stream mapping, cell design, supply chain and team involvement problem solving. Cross functional teams learned how to apply these techniques and tools, on their own, throughout the plant.

One of the first initiatives following the introductory training was a cell layout in the company's

transmitter/receiver area. The lean project team succeeded in doubling the output from the assembly process from 25 units per week to 50. This improvement resulted in a revenue increase of approximately \$500,000.

The success of this initiative was instrumental in helping to spread a lean culture to other areas of the facility.

A second cell design targeted a labor-intensive panel assembly that involved the attachment of many delicate wires. Excessive movement and handling were causing unacceptable defects in the product.

Working with the NH MEP project manager, the project team was able to reorganize the production area and staging process with the result of improving output by 20 percent and reducing workmanship defects by a remarkable 80 percent.

Led by Cobham's Lean Director Tariq Husain, company employees targeted other areas for improvement. A kaizen event targeting the customer service process succeeded in addressing the problem of outstanding orders by reducing lead time and improving efficiency. Another kaizen event successfully resolved errors in the accounts payable department.

With one achievement following another, Cobham Surveillance's Director of Quality summarized his company's experience in implementing lean.

"We're fortunate to have a good management team that buys into lean and promotes it. But for our employees, seeing the dividend is what sells it. The results of lean initiatives are fast and dramatic. Our employees now understand that lean is an enterprise-wide opportunity," said Goodman.