

# Case study: Harlow Group

## Business happy to put theory into practice

*The Harlow Group is a leading sheet metal fabricator and subcontractor. The firm, based in the Essex town from which it takes its name, offers a range of services from CNC and laser profiling through to assembly work and painting. It now offers a range of additional services including design, prototype development to logistical management on complex projects. The firm had just taken on a production engineer to investigate lead time reduction when it was approached to take part in the Essex County Council-backed EMIG scheme (Essex Manufacturing Innovation and Growth), delivered by the Institute for Manufacturing.*

## Company background

Bill Timpson, Managing Director of the Harlow Group, describes the business as a one stop shop for sheet metal manufacturing. Established in 1975 the company now employs 96 people in it's three sites across the town. It has an annual turnover of £6.7m.

"We do all the usual things that a traditional sub-contracting business is expected to do, CNC, laser work welding, forming and the like, but we also offer packaged solutions to customers," explained Mr Timpson. "We've now got a wide range of customers in a number of sectors making products for the likes of GE Aviation, Sony, Snap-On and Mars. Our clients are drawn from a range of sectors aerospace, telecoms, renewable energy, retail and vending. In this climate it is good business practice not to be locked into one particular sector but to spread the risk across a number of industries

## Why EMIG and the IfM?

The company had just started a project designed to reduce the lead time in ordering, when they were approached about the EMIG programme. Mr Timpson explained: "I do come across quite a few people, the consultant-type people, promoting but I have very rarely got anything out of it. They spend a lot of time suggesting things without actually being directly involved in the business.

"Cambridge University came along with a similar promotion, but they sold it quite well and I thought I would give them a chance. The difference was that the person describing the scheme was going to be directly involved with the business. They were less bureaucratic, keener to participate and get involved. They were keen to listen before making recommendations. We wanted people who were going to be party of it and so far it is going quite well."

The approach came at an opportune time for the company: "We had embarked on a time reduction programme just before IfM approached us. We had taken on a Production Engineer whose task was to make us more efficient. It seemed like a good opportunity to tap into the theory and draw on the manufacturing experience of people from the IfM. We also thought it would help our production engineer grow into the job."

## The partnership explained

Mr Timpson had identified lead reduction as an issue that could benefit from attention, he explained: "Our lead time performance was about industry standard, four weeks. However in many instances our customers require a shorter lead time in order to get their product to market. To deliver this service we need to use the available lead time effectively. Therefore we have to understand and analyse all aspects of lead-time from order intake through to MRP and capacity planning.

"A second, related problem was in batch size. Running a large batch size was no problem; you can build and run, but if it's a small batch size then time becomes a critical factor. Setting up for different production runs means more down time, we need to understand how this is built in. The basic rule is order less, pay more, but if we can understand where the hold up is we can make it more cost effective for our customers."

Working with the IfM's industrial fellows, John McManus and Dr Derek Ford, Harlow Group have started to make in roads into the issue.

"John and Derek have been meeting with our production engineer, taking him through the IfM approach. This process has been ongoing over a period of two to three months. Together they agree and action, we implement and then they review. It's still a bit early but visually there have definitely been some improvements but culturally it's going to take more time."

## The company says

Mr Timpson said the major benefit has been the ability to work with the IfM advisors

"It was a good opportunity to learn about the theory side of things, but the guys also backed it up with a lot of manufacturing experience. The ability to tap into that has given us a lot of confidence. It has been a positive working relationship. We'll need time to see how robust it is, and it will be interesting to see if the cultural changes can be sustained.

"Another plus was their willingness to get involved. We were implementing a new MRP system but Derek came and talked our team through the principles of it and discussed the theories behind it, which was really useful."

The MD is hopeful that the relationship will continue. Students from the IfM will be visiting the company to do some further analysis on the lead time issue.

"The student project is an interesting facet for us, it'll be a challenge for them, but depending on how they get on, it'll make me think about the quality of the students and whether we could do it again and if they are worth taking on in a full-time capacity."

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