

## FLYING HIGH: DRONE MANUFACTURER NAVIGATES RAPID GROWTH USING LEAN AND SMART TALENT TOOLS

**ABOUT SKYFISH, LLC.** Skyfish, based in Stevensville, Montana, designs and builds autonomous drones for inspecting and measuring towers, bridges, powerlines, and wind turbines with engineering grade accuracy. Dr. Orest Pilskalns founded Skyfish as a small start-up in his home state of Montana in 2014. Since then, it has grown to approximately 40 employees across two facilities, with much of the workforce growth occurring in the last two to three years. By combining UAS (unmanned aircraft system) technologies with a suite of 3D modeling, mapping, and data processing software, Skyfish serves a growing number of customers in utilities, communications, transportation and government who are responsible for accurately and safely monitoring the conditions of critical infrastructure.

**THE CHALLENGE.** As product demand increased, Skyfish expanded its workforce to increase production capacity. Management wanted to ensure that the larger number of employees could work safely and efficiently in the existing space. The company also recognized that it needed to improve throughput and reduce rework in order to meet quality and on-time order delivery goals for a larger number of orders. Skyfish contacted MMEC, part of the MEP National Network™, for help.

**MEP CENTER'S ROLE.** MMEC Business Advisor Steve Dybdal worked with Skyfish Production and Inventory Manager Jordan Beyer to plan training for employees in improved manufacturing operations. The plan encompassed training in both lean manufacturing and Smart Talent workforce modules. Dybdal also connected the company to the State of Montana Incumbent Worker Training grant fund program, which helped to reduce investment costs. Eleven employees participated in on-site workshops on how to implement the basic principles of lean manufacturing, including identifying and eliminating wasteful practices, applying 5S principles, and achieving standard work. To complement this, MMEC and Skyfish collaborated on the creation of 16 Smart Talent modules to document the specific knowledge, training and skills needed for individual positions, which supports consistent training and standardized procedures.

The implementation of basic lean principles had a significant impact on productivity. After Skyfish improved the organization of production suites, developed cells, and created Kanban inventory systems, throughput increased from the completion of one drone craft per week to as high as two crafts per day. In turn, this helped reduce costs and shorten order lead times. The Smart Talent training modules have facilitated effective onboarding of new employees as the company grows. By defining the ongoing skill development needed for career path advancement, the modules are also expected to assist with employee satisfaction and retention.

"As a newer manager to manufacturing, lean training taught me many useful things to help increase productivity and efficiency. In fact, the training was good for my whole team who attended – it especially helps us organize and maintain clean workspaces."

-Jordan Beyer, Skyfish Production and Inventory Manager

## RESULTS



\$235,000 in cost savings



\$81,800 in new investment

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