

LEAN PRINCIPLES HELP CERAMIC LIGHTING MAKER DESIGN A
BRIGHTER FUTURE

ABOUT HWANG BISHOP DESIGNS. Felicia Hwang established Hwang Bishop Designs in 1993, with a vision for handcrafted, bespoke lighting that was made to order to the interior design community. Today, Hwang Bishop is a designer go-to for custom ceramic table lamps, sconces, pendants and side tables. Their signature saturated pieces are sold in trade showrooms and at select home furnishings boutiques around the world. They have been featured in Architectural Digest, Elle Decor and House Beautiful, among other magazines. The company is based in Warren, Rhode Island.

THE CHALLENGE. “I didn’t get into this business to learn about manufacturing efficiencies,” said Hwang, a talented, self-taught designer who studied at Dartmouth College. But in 2019 she recognized that was what the business needed in order to scale up. “We had been operating as a small artisan studio and needed to bring manufacturing efficiencies to our operation. I didn’t have the formal knowledge that I needed to streamline operations. We had been doing things the same way for a long time with a small number of people so there was some push back to change. We needed someone to teach us the manufacturing principles that create a scalable production model.” She was referred to Polaris MEP, Rhode Island’s Manufacturing Extension Partnership Center and part of the MEP National Network™.

MEP CENTER'S ROLE. Project Manager Nathan Bonds toured the studio with Hwang. They identified the paint area as the best place to start making improvements. Bonds brought a “Learn-Do” approach, first teaching the team the principles of lean manufacturing “5S” and then guiding them in applying those principles. Bonds started by creating a Spaghetti Diagram of the paint area flow. Hwang and her team were motivated by that picture, which she said showed, “indisputably,” that their set-up didn’t make sense.

Hwang said Bonds was an active partner. “He wasn’t just a guy there with a notepad. He would get dirty. He would say, ‘This needs to be moved’ and then he’d help move it.” This positive energy made it easy to get buy-in for future changes. The Lean principles and the 5S pilot in the paint area had an immediate positive impact on the business.

Polaris MEP has since collaborated with Hwang Bishop on projects ranging from a 5S of the ceramics area, creating a “lean office,” scheduling and work instruction improvement, and consulting on layout. The founder also has taken advantage of Polaris MEP’s network of third-party specialists, including human resources and legal guidance. The Lean training became the foundation of a culture of continuous improvement, and Hwang says she still quotes Bonds when making decisions. “Nathan Bonds was absolutely integral to the survival and growth of our business,” said Hwang. “Without the changes that were made as a direct result of his consulting, we would not have been able to handle the surge of business we had post-COVID in 2020.”

“Polaris MEP has been a key partner in our growth for the past several years and is our go-to for any manufacturing advice and needs. They have been invaluable to the survival and growth of our business.”

-Felicia Hwang, Creative Director and Founder

RESULTS



3 jobs retained, 7 jobs created



\$185,000 in cost savings



\$73,500 invested in training, new products and processes



\$70,000 invested in plant improvements and equipment



Sales growth of roughly 30% in the first year, 40-50% year-over-year growth in following years

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