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FHC engages Maine MEP for help

BOWDOIN — As one of Maine’s most successful mid-size manufacturers, FHC Inc. of Bowdoin has developed a global market for its neurosurgical products. From its manufacturing facility, it supplies an international clientele of neurosurgeons and neuroscientists with an array of microelectrodes and special purpose clinical instruments.

A factor in the company’s success has been its entrepreneurial zeal. Since its founding in 1970, FHC has designed and manufactured more than 7,000 unique metal microelectrodes and a broad range of state-of-the-art clinical and research instrumentation. Recognizing that innovation is critical for future growth, the company historically has had multiple potential new products in the pipeline. But like many smaller firms with limited human and financial resources, many of these pipeline projects remained unfinished.

To address this issue, FHC engaged the Maine Manufacturing Extension Partnership (Maine MEP) to provide innovation engineering coaching and lean manufacturing consulting in order to achieve product and process improvements.

“After having several staff attend an Innovation Engineering Leadership Institute, we engaged Maine MEP’s John Karp to work with us on a Jump Start project, which yielded two new products. One of these we were able to bring to market in a record time of nine months, versus a more typical time of 18 months,” said Keri Seitz, chief executive officer of FHC.

Innovation Engineering Jump Starts are fast and focused projects for accelerating profitable growth while providing a hands-on experience with the Innovation Engineering Management System (IEMS). The IEMS are typically one to three months in duration and involve three steps: education and immersion by the MEP project manager in a company’s challenge, a one-day Jump Start session and project acceleration coaching.

Led by Karp, Maine MEP’s first black belt Innovation Engineering consultant, FHC used the Jump Start to successfully address a challenge encountered by the company’s European customers, who prefer to use a shorter 28 cm lead on FHC’s

microTargeting and Star Drive to place the devices during neurosurgical procedures. Having seen how the techniques of innovation engineering could be used to innovatively modify a product and successfully prototype and commercialize it, FHC decided to embrace the process on a wider scale.

“Following this initial success, we engaged John to work with us on implementing the Innovation Engineering Management System, which we customized to our new Great Idea Group (GIG) process to fit our strict medical device quality and documentation protocols,” Seitz said.

The FHC CEO touted the results achieved by working with Maine MEP to rebuild the company’s project management system using innovation engineering concepts and tools.

“Since implementing our revised systems, we have seen a marked increase in employee participation in new idea generation,” CEO Seitz said. “We’ve found significant process improvements and have many new products under development that wouldn’t have found their way forward without our new avenue of development.”