

POWERFUL IMPROVEMENTS FROM EMPOWERED EMPLOYEES

A Need to Quickly Turn Data Into Decision-Making Information

One of the world's largest custom connector manufacturers has a unique differentiator: allowing customers to order small quantities, down to a single item. In fact, seven pieces is the average order size. Even with its ability to fulfill small orders and its vast inventory, speed is still a key value proposition, and the manufacturer delivers orders quickly—in most cases in less than 48 hours.

As a result of its exceptional operations and delivery speed, they have developed an industry niche and a strong position in its marketplace. However, as the company began eyeing aggressive

growth goals, even this industry-leading status would be held up to the mirror as the organization sought to improve its position. Leadership recognized that operations were strong—nothing was broken and in need of a fix—but also knew that the current state may not support growth toward its strategic vision.

"The manufacturer had reached an important time in their company's history as customers now see them as their trusted partner and technical expert," explained Mark Stevens, Wipfli partner. "To build the global foundations that will support controlled sales growth over the

next five years, they needed to reevaluate existing processes across all of our facilities."

A further risk to its growth objectives was the current state of the industry and the difficulty in hiring talent. As for most manufacturers today, finding skilled employees had become a constant challenge.

Consequently, creating a fully realized growth strategy would require change... somewhere, somehow, in some form or fashion.

Discover, Uncover, Improve

Wipfli recommended the manufacturer begin by strategically mapping areas within the organization where opportunities for growth could surface as a result and by leveraging their strong organizational culture as a factor for greater success.

“Any manufacturer can make changes to support growth, such as introducing a new process or adding new equipment,” explained Mark Stevens, Wipfli partner. “But the idea behind Wipfli’s approach is that a company can achieve and sustain growth by shifting the way people think; in other words, by establishing and leveraging the right culture and then letting culture lead the way.”

This kind of cultural approach to improving operations, enhancing business value, and increasing EBITDA and profits intrigued the manufacturer’s leadership team. As a starting point, Wipfli suggested conducting a single discovery event at one of the manufacturer’s

locations, an idea that was given the green light.

The discovery event began by assembling an on-site cross-functional team and zeroing in on a particular product line that represented a very large part of the company’s production volume. Because the steps for that product line were similar to other lines throughout the manufacturer’s plants, this first discovery event would serve as a more comprehensive test case to be rolled out elsewhere.

The approach required the team to first slow the manufacturing process down and identify all the various steps. Doing so would provide a better understanding of what really occurs when production orders moved through the plant—from raw material receipt to finished product shipment.

Slowing things down in an environment that prides itself on speed was counterintuitive to many team members,

some of whom openly doubted the exercise. Wipfli encouraged and welcomed all skeptics as everyone on the team put their trust in the event and went to work breaking processes down and putting each step under a microscope. The team’s mission was to identify and reduce waste in all its forms within the value stream process map.

One of the key discoveries was that although the process followed a very linear path through the facility, there were an extraordinary number of “pick-ups and put-downs” in each process area. The team coined this as “hidden movement” and set out to address it, along with other inefficiencies and waste they had uncovered.

Collaboratively, the group came up with more than 50 improvement ideas, categorizing them all into activity themes, benefits, and priorities and ultimately presenting their improvement ideas to an impressed management team.

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- Mark Stevens, Partner – Wipfli



Results: The Power of Empowerment

Fueled by the discovery event and with the full support of management, a team set out to tackle the high priority changes that were identified. Out of 20 process steps, 5 were targeted for further analysis and redesign.

In this redesign phase, Wipfli and the organization's team completely reorganized their quality and bagging work centers. They achieved a smooth, metered flow of work through the newly engineered areas with the addition of a new conveyor belt plus the introduction of a "water spider." A water spider is a dedicated team member who moves and

stages the production materials to the bagging and quality specialists so they can focus on their valuable tasks rather than finding the next item.

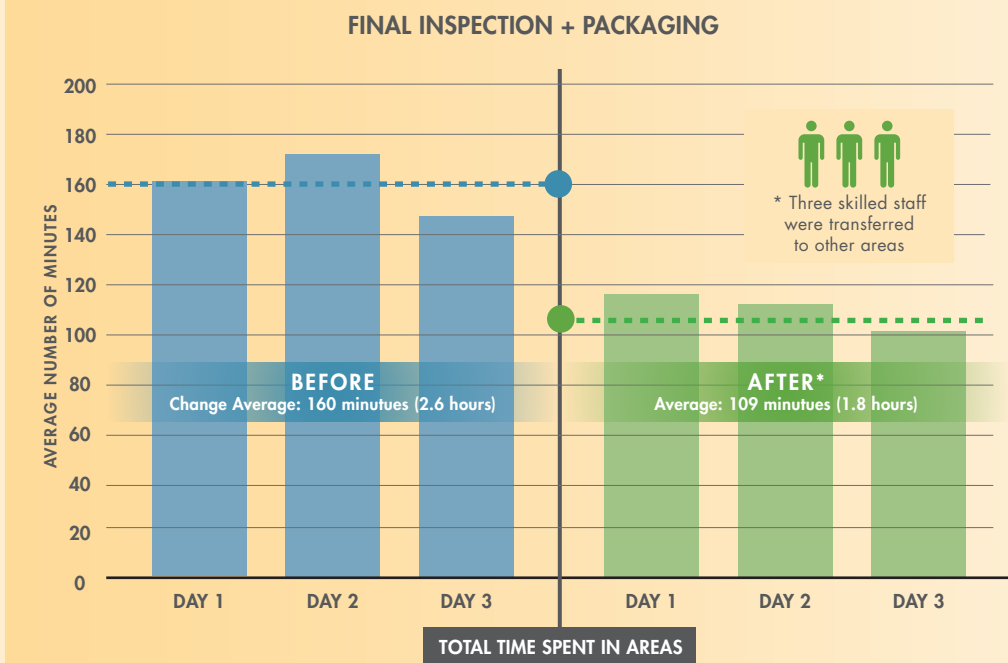
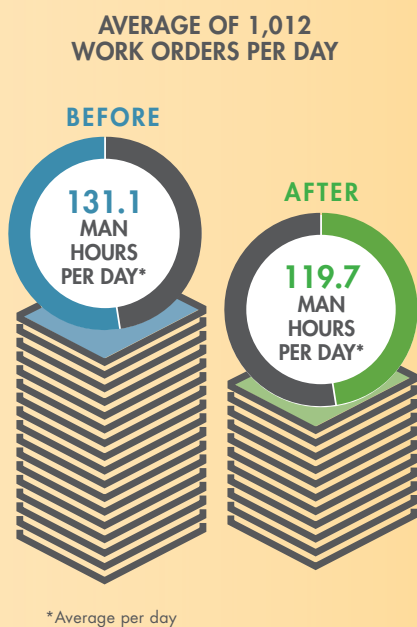
In essence, they transformed a disconnected process that utilized distinct areas for final production assembly, quality, and bagging operations into one continuous workflow. This eliminated the inconsistent workload and many "starts" and "stops" that previously occurred in this stage of the production value stream.

As a result of the shop floor redesign, production completion time has been reduced. The team combined similar

job duties in the bagging and quality inspection work centers and was able to reduce the five previous steps to three. This process redesign eliminated at least 50% of final quality inspection time while maintaining quality standards. Supervisors were now freed up to manage and coach rather than perform the actual work and triage issues.

The manufacturer is completing 30%-40% more work with three fewer staff. These valuable and skilled employees transferred to fill important open positions at within the organization. Parts come into the area and spend 6.8 hours less time there.

An efficiency snapshot before and after merging the packaging and final inspection activities speaks volumes:



Well Connected to Its Growth Strategy

Recognizing that culture can be a differentiator and that the answers to its challenges can come from those already closest to the work. The work, the company empowers its people to pursue "better," to

find solutions and implement improvements. By enabling a culture of continuous improvement while still delivering on their core value proposition of speed, customer

confidence and trust are maintained and enhanced. When it comes to connecting production operations to future growth, the message is "we are ready now."

Learn more about how Wipfli can help your organization:

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