

## Seminar stresses working 'lean'

By Lee Howard

Norwich - With several of the manufacturers at Wednesday's seminar reporting business down 30 to 40 percent in the past year, the idea of Lean manufacturing and procurement took on a new sense of urgency.

"It's a very serious subject - the subject of survival," said Kenn Fischburg, president of Consumers Interstate Corp., a family-owned industrial supply distributor that hosted the all-day event in its sprawling headquarters at the Norwich Industrial Park. "We cannot survive if we don't get better every day."

The idea behind Lean business techniques - derived from the Japanese philosophy of continuous improvement - is to increase efficiencies so the manufacturing and procurement process results in as little wasted effort and materials as possible. The event brought out about 50 people from as far away as Massachusetts.

Lean techniques have been incorporated into many American factories for the past decade or two, but now they are being introduced into the office environment as well. Consumers Interstate, which has about 55 employees, recently patented a Lean Procurement system that promises to shorten the time between when an order is placed and when it is filled - introducing, at the same time, the concept that pushing all orders through one company saves a tremendous amount of hours in the procurement process.

"What is the real benefit of Lean?" asked Andrew Dudka, chief executive of Goldline Controls of North Kingstown, R.I., one of the speakers at the program. "It is not the cost of the part; it's the total acquisition cost."

Lean plants reduce excessive inventories through "just-in-time" manufacturing that results in products being completed about the same time they need to be shipped. Such facilities, using so-called "Kaizen events" in which teams of workers get together to brainstorm - also take a hard look at other major costs, such as potential safety problems, excessive paperwork, badly designed workspaces and growing layers of bureaucracy.

At Davis-Standard, a Pawcatuck-based manufacturer of extrusion equipment made for various industries, one of the keys to a Lean turnaround started with the factory floor but now is moving into the front office.

"We think we are going to see a very significant improvement in cycle time," said Davis-Standard president Jim Murphy, another panelist, referring to the time between when an order is placed and when it is shipped.

Murphy said the company holds Kaizen events five to six times a quarter, headed by a continuous-improvement manager. Improvements are measured and then displayed for all to see, he added.

"You can't improve if you can't measure it," he said.

Ken Pickering, chief executive of Foster Corp./Putnam Plastics in Putnam, said making improvements can be tough - it took his company three years to up its on-time delivery rate from 95 to 98 percent. But that, he said, was the difference between being good and great.

Pickering said he asks for one idea a month from each employee on how the company can improve. Often ideas are then bandied about at group meetings and an even better concept emerges.

"Seventy percent of them are used without manager involvement," he said.