

# At St. Cloud freezer factory, Job Skills Partnership scores again

Amid the talk about work-force skills, quality jobs, living wages, occupational health and safety, company cutbacks, education-business partnerships and Minnesota competitiveness, there's heat in cold freezers.

Rather, the heat is in St. Cloud's freezer factory. Working with St. Cloud State University, Frigidaire is casting a model for job and skills improvement. The university is getting valuable new educational opportunities for students — inside the freezer factory.

The winners will be the university and its students, the company and its employees, the community and the state's economy.

Making this possible is a tiny state agency, the Minnesota Job Skills Partnership, which makes small grants to facilitate business/education cooperation. The agency provided \$88,500 for the Frigidaire-St. Cloud State project. It has made about 140 such grants since 1984 to upgrade job skills.

The agency operates on a minuscule basic budget of \$2 million a year. But it is, Senate Majority Leader Roger Moe told a crowded work-force conference this month, the best job-per-dollar training in Minnesota. It's "fabulous," Moe said. His enthusiasm is understandable. He was instrumental in 1982 in bringing the idea from Massachusetts

The Job Skills Partnership



**Leonard Inskip**

grants must be matched by business. The program helps participating schools expand their courses, hopefully with a lasting impact.

That's what happened after 1992 when 3M and St. Cloud State University formed a training and process-improvement partnership with three small manufacturers in east-central Minnesota. Each was a 3M supplier. The 3M contribution included a proprietary technology for factory processes. Now a consortium of St. Cloud State, four technical colleges and the University of Minnesota-Duluth uses the technology to help manufacturers.

When 3M phases out its magnetic tape plant at Hutchinson, any successor business — whether by 3M or some other company — may well turn to the Job Skills Partnership for training help, as 3M and other Hutchinson area firms have done previously.

When workers already on the

job get such help, they become more valuable employees and often can command better wages and job security. If an employer later shuts down, the workers are better equipped to move on.

The Frigidaire-St. Cloud State University program was among those described at the work-force conference — an event sponsored by the newly merged higher education system in cooperation with two dozen other groups.

Swedish-owned Frigidaire has 1,650 employees making food freezers at St. Cloud. It wants more robotics and automation. St. Cloud State's manufacturing engineering department wants real-world training for students, greater industrial visibility that produces jobs for graduates and heightened university understanding of business needs.

A lab and classroom are being added at Frigidaire. University students and company employees will share projects and get training. Already, a joint design team has developed a robot to apply a 300-degree sealant to freezers, previously a tedious, possibly dangerous task for a worker. Eventually, the partners will develop robotics training for all employees. Because higher skills will help assure jobs, the workers' union is supportive. The person placed by the robot was retrained to less risky work. Eventually, the St. Cloud

Technical College will take part.

According to Roger Hughes, executive director, the Job Skills Partnership's record includes: training completed for more than 23,500 workers, a majority of them being retrained rather than entering the labor force; 136 projects involving (with duplications) about 50 training institutions and 300 companies, \$11.5 million in grants and about \$25 million in business matches. For the first 85 projects, the average cost was only \$249 per trainee.

Despite its record, the agency is something of an orphan in state government. It began in 1983 in the State Planning Agency. Then it moved to the Higher Education Coordinating Board. In 1989, it moved to the Department of Trade and Economic Development (DTED), where it remains. The department provides administrative help, but the Legislature sets appropriations and an independent board decides grants. The last Legislature increased the basic biennial appropriation to \$4 million from \$3 million and added \$500,000 for special activity in the central cities.

The agency is only a small player when legislators consider funding of big agencies for higher education, job training and economic development. Its functions cross all three fields. Further, its future will be affected by as-yet-undetermined interest by the newly merged

higher education system; by DTED's priority effort to replenish an economic recovery fund; by the new Governor's Work-force Development Council, which will hold its first meeting in December; and by new state training priorities dictated by federal funding changes.

Monica Manning, the Job Skills Partnership's first manager and now a leader on educational change, is a state Senate appointee on the board of Minnesota Technology, the state's program to strengthen manufacturing. That board, Manning says, hears frequently from small- to medium-size manufacturers that their big challenge is work-force training. The partnership's role is particularly important, she says, because its competitive grants process "forces companies and schools to build the right training programs."

The work-force conference was told that Minnesota lacks a "high-wage, high-productivity strategy." The growth of low-wage jobs makes that a legitimate concern, but not wholly accurate. The Minnesota Job Skills Partnership is one approach to create better jobs. It's earned and deserves support — from politicians and anyone concerned about the economy, jobs, wages and education.

— Leonard Inskip is a Star Tribune columnist and editorial writer.