

State helping manufacturing businesses excel

Free, non-profit service revved by donations from 'private angels'

By Christine Hierlmaier
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Like an extension educator who makes house calls to farmers and consults on crop yields and business management, a manufacturing specialist with Minnesota Technology makes house calls to manufacturers to guide them through the maze of technology enhancements.

And the advice is free.

This public, non-profit corporation established through legislation in 1987 typically assists Minnesota companies with fewer than 250 employees. Six regional offices, including one located in St. Cloud, focus on local manufacturers and local issues. And the St. Cloud office has led the way in partnering those manufacturers with educational and technical resources.



Jacques Koppel
PRESIDENT OF
MINNESOTA TECH

angels who on a regular basis invest in these companies."

Track record strong

Since it began recording results in 1992, Minnesota Technology has helped more than 2,000 businesses — about 400 of them annually — contributing almost \$250 million to company bottom lines and the state economy in sales, profits and investment.

It has done this not only through manufacturing specialists, but also through an electronic information service, video-conferencing sites, a technology development office at the University of Minnesota and software testing centers.

The St. Cloud Regional Office for

Minnesota Technology is typically quiet during the day as its three manufacturing specialists are out making house calls. The specialists cover 14 counties from Cass to Wright and from Todd to Pine.

"We're like the old-time doctors," said Sandy Voigt, St. Cloud regional director. "We help companies make decisions based on options and choices."

That's something Bob Heurung appreciates. He's the owner of Painting Specialists in Avon, a painting and millwork pre-finishing firm for homeowners, contractors, lumberyards, window and fixture companies.

When manufacturing specialist Ed Schultz showed up at his company, Heurung noted how he talked not only to him, but also his sales people and other employees to get a sense of the business operation.

Then he made suggestions, giving Heurung a chance to mull it over and decide on the best implementation. "He comes in and gives us ideas and lets us put it into play. He doesn't tell us how to run the business."

Minnesota Technology assisted Painting Specialists in shop floor layout for new automated finishing equipment, and resourcing environmental specialists to help the company comply with safety and clean air regulations. Schultz also consulted on quality materials issues and marketing.

His advice cost the company nothing but time for exploring and planning. Heurung liked that too. "Very much so, it's cost efficient."

Funding is key to success

To offer assistance free of charge, Minnesota Technology receives about \$6 million in state funding, about \$2.5 million in federal funding, and it generates about \$1 million through grants and other sources. The budget comes to about \$10 million, most of which is directed to clients, Koppel said.

"We want to make our corporation part of the state's infrastructure to support the economy. And we believe in local initiatives," he said.

Last month Minnesota Technology announced the first results of a pilot project called the Technology Partnership Fund. It invested more than \$500,000 in



TIMES PHOTO BY MIKE KNAAK

At Painting Specialists, Kip Opatz finished some wood trim. Minnesota Technology assisted the firm

MINNESOTA TECHNOLOGY AWARDS

Minnesota Technology is looking for technology leaders, companies and innovations which make Minnesota a leading center for technology.

The first-ever Minnesota Technology Awards program is designed to heighten public awareness of how vital diverse technology is to the state, according to Jacques Koppel, president of Minnesota Technology.

The awards are co-sponsored by Honeywell, Hutchinson Technology, Medtronic. Winners will be announced at a ceremony and program May 1 at the Marriott City Center.

Nomination applications are due by May 15. Contact Jane Petersen at 3073 or (612) 672-3423.

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matching funds in six Minnesota companies to develop new products in cooperation with post-secondary schools.

One of the companies, FENA Design, St. Cloud, received \$100,000 to develop a safer and more responsive stand-up wheelchair in collaboration with St. Cloud State University. A product launch is scheduled for May 1998.

Governor Arne Carlson has proposed an additional \$2 million per year investment to the Fund for the state's 1998-99 budget.

St. Cloud support

Minnesota Technology region has always supported local initiatives, Voigt said. The corporation works regularly with St. Cloud Technical College and other local companies in training and exploration.

"We were really one of the reasons for growth here because of growth here. The corporation assists local projects as the implementation of the state's infrastructure to support the economy."

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on company in shop floor layout for automated
shing equipment.

RESOURCES

■ Minnesota Technology's Information Services offer 55 public sites, including one at the St. Cloud regional office, where businesses can locate technology resources, conduct commerce and communicate with like people and organizations electronically. Its World Wide Web site is located at <http://www.mntech.org>

■ The corporation also offers several video-conferencing sites for businesses to communicate with customers, clients and companies around the world. Several video-conferencing seminars also are held at these sites — one at the St. Cloud Technical College — through the year.

■ The Technology Development Center at the University of Minnesota helps place University-created technology in the hands of companies which can develop it into new enterprises and industries.

■ Minnesota Technology has established three software centers — one in Duluth to support software development companies, one in St. Paul where software makers can test their products, and one in St. Cloud at St. Cloud State University where manufacturers can test-drive software before they buy it.

■ For more information on these services or others, call the St. Cloud regional office at 654-5201 or check out its online site at <http://www.mntech.org/cenreg.htm>. Other regional offices are located in Moorhead, Redwood Falls, Rochester, Minneapolis, and Virginia.

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