

SCSU assists Electrolux

By Eric O'Link

A handful of SCSU students and faculty are putting their heads together to help refrigerator-maker Electrolux leave its competition in the deep freeze.

SCSU's Department of Mechanical and Manufacturing Engineering received a \$100,000 Minnesota Job Skills Partnership (MJSP) grant Friday to establish a training program for Electrolux employees. The company has a manufacturing plant in St. Cloud.

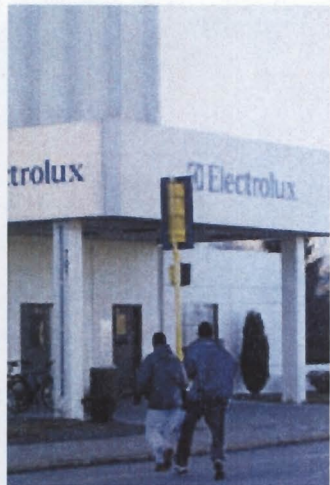
Associate Professor Ben Baliga is the director of the grant and project. He thought it would be good for the department to start a training program with the company, using a MJSP grant, since he has already worked with the manufacturer for more than a year.

"We have had a very good relationship with them and it was natural that we wanted them to succeed and do well against their competition," he said.

Multi-national Electrolux is the world's largest producer of kitchen, cleaning and outdoor-use appliances. More than 1,600 people work at its St. Cloud manufacturing plant, which produces refrigerators and chest freezers. It is the largest employer in St. Cloud.

"After the closing of Fingerhut, we all have a vested interest in the local engineering industry," Baliga said.

SCSU has full control of the grant, although St. Cloud Technical College and Ridgewater College will work as partners in the training program.



Media Credit: Kim Bucholz
Electrolux has been a large employer in the St. Cloud Area for years. SCSU received a \$100,000 grant to establish a training program for its employees.

One of the program's goals is to improve the quality of manufacturing.

"The aim of that training is to help (engineers) improve the process, the quality of the product to be competitive," Baliga said.

Because Electrolux faces serious competition internationally, Baliga said standards of quality must be kept high if the company is to remain viable. Manufacturers in other countries have a labor cost advantage over Electrolux, so Electrolux must beat out its competition on quality and reliability.

Mechanical and Manufacturing Engineering faculty members also hope to help Electrolux incorporate automation into its manufacturing processes.

"Fridge-making is extremely labor intensive," Baliga explained. "There's a lot of work lift injuries and things like that - they're very heavy things, actually."

He went on to say that he could use a computer program to model a specific operation at the Electrolux plant and predict whether it might cause an employee to get a lower back injury.

Ridgewater College will offer robotic welding training and design signs to improve safety in the plant. St. Cloud Technical College will provide diversity training for employees and leadership training for management.

Graduate students in the department will also work with Electrolux employees in an internship-like manner. Instead of doing projects like process capability study in a lab, Baliga said, his students will be able to work in the plant and present their results to plant engineers.

"They get to apply what they do in the class, instead of applying it in a lab situation, they get to do it on real machines in the plant," he said.

Students use what they've learned in class during the week at the Electrolux plant on Fridays.

Baliga said the project should last about two years; 680 employees, from process workers to senior managers, will receive training.

"It's pretty exciting," he said, "because one of the things is that I'm giving back something, along with my students, to the St. Cloud community."