

TEXTILE MANUFACTURER COUNTERS FOREIGN COMPETITION THROUGH ISO CERTIFICATION

BACKGROUND:

Absecon Mills has been a supplier of fabric for the public seating industry for 35 years. A number of years ago the company started a technical textiles division to supply fabric to the Ballistic and Composite industries. The family owned company has 70 employees with 58 of them located in the Cologne New Jersey facility and the additional employees being in the field.

CHALLENGE:

Absecon's business was negatively impacted by the opening of trade barriers, and the dropping of tariffs and duties with China. The company's strategy to combat foreign competition was to expand into the US military markets as products supplied to them must be Berry amendment compliant, i.e., produced within the United States.

Quality, repeatability and traceability are critical when doing business in these markets. Virtually all of the customers Absecon would be supplying are ISO certified and require ISO certification of their primary and subcontractors. To compete in this market Absecon Mills would need to achieve ISO 9001 certification. In addition to this new market, Absecon's core contract upholstery business was expanding into the Class 8 Truck Seating Market. In order to be a Tier II Supplier to that market, ISO certification was required. In addition, the certification would open doors to:

- Body armor for law enforcement through Safariland and Point Blank, the two largest Body Armor Manufacturers who control over 60% of the domestic ballistic vest market
- Ballistic Defense contracts for the SPS (Soldier Protection System) comprised of ballistic vest torso protection, extremity protection, and load bearing harnesses
- Sell fabric to Composite One and North American Composites, the two largest composite products distributors in the US

*The Berry Amendment (USC, Title 10, 2533b, Section 832 of Public Law 107-107), requires the Department of Defense to give preference in procurement to domestically produced and manufactured, clothing, fabrics, tents and any item of individual equipment made from fabrics.

SOLUTION:

Having a long history of working with New Jersey Manufacturing Extension Program, Inc. (NJMEP), Absecon Mills turned to them again in order to become certified. Becoming certified is costly so for a relatively small company it would be a challenge. NJMEP and its Resource, Prism International, a company with extensive experience in ISO certification, worked closely with Absecon to create a plan for implementing ISO 9100 and achieving registration. Assisted by NJMEP, Absecon applied for a New Jersey Department of Labor Skills4Jersey Training Grant to help defer the cost. The grant was awarded and over a twelve-month period fifty-eight employees were trained in the skills and processes necessary to achieve ISO certification, key components of which are documentation to provide definition and structure for the management system and implementing a document control system.

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RESULTS:

Absecon Mills, as a result on its work with NJMEP and its resource, is now an ISO 9100 registered company and able to do business with companies formerly out of their wheelhouse.

As reported by in the independently conducted NIST survey 6-12 months upon completion of the project Absecon Mills:

- Increased sales by \$2.2 million
- Achieved a cost saving of \$200,000 with a saving in workforce training of \$22,000 as a result of the NJDOL grant
- Invested \$31,090.00 in workforce training as part of the grant requirement
- Invested \$588,000 in New Products and Processes
- Hired 14 new employees and retained 15 who were at risk

In addition, as a result of the training, European Bread passed the NSF Certification Audit which has opened doors that had previously been closed to them.

When David Adair, Executive Vice President of Absecon Mills Inc. completed the required grant closeout report he stated, “We were very satisfied with both NJMEP and the instructor provided. Both provided us with great service and accommodated our training needs and schedule. I would recommend both!” In addition, he recently explained, “Absecon Mills is like the Phoenix. In 2011 we sustained a devastating fire. Since then, with the help of NJMEP and our dedicated employees we have come back... investing in the business and expanding our markets to position the company for continued growth.

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