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Manufacturing

The Business Journal of Milwaukee

From the January 17, 2005 print edition

Leading Edge

Innovation more than buzzword

Rich Kirchen

Dorner Manufacturing Corp. appears to be doing the right things in embracing innovation as a strategy to compete with the Chinese. Dorner implemented lean manufacturing processes four years ago, and the past two years the firm has been seeking greater efficiencies from its suppliers.



However, not all of Dorner's suppliers are so enlightened or cooperative. After an initial positive response to the supplier initiative, progress has stalled, says Gregg Sipek, Dorner's

purchasing manager.

"It's still a struggle," he said.

That can be frustrating for companies like Dorner, a 40-year-old Hartland conveyor equipment manufacturer. And it's a perplexing situation for American manufacturing -- especially smaller firms that supply the likes of Dorner -- in the face of a Chinese juggernaut that shows no sign of dissipating.

Management consultant Robert Tucker is concerned that, other than the technologically advanced "big guys" of American manufacturing, many firms are "asleep" in the face of the China threat and won't

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budge from their comfort zone of doing things the way they've always done them. Innovating their processes, products or strategies is the last thing on their agenda as they put out their latest fire, said Tucker, of The Innovation Resource Consulting Group, Santa Barbara, Calif.

"They just don't want to do the work required when they have this ferocious competitor," he said.

Tucker and many other manufacturing experts believe that emphasizing innovation is crucial to the survival of American manufacturers. Nevertheless, a recent Industry Week survey found that Chinese manufacturers listed innovation as their second-highest market strategy, while American firms ranked innovation "a distant seventh."

Generating new jobs

While prioritizing innovation won't save all the manufacturing jobs that remain the heart of Wisconsin's economy, it can preserve many and generate some new ones.

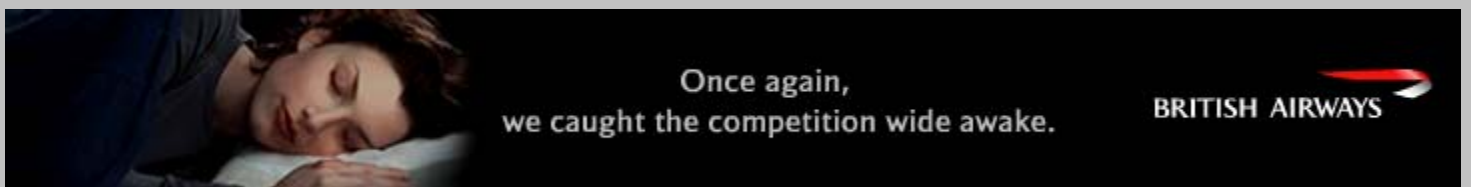
To that end, a study is under way to examine the types of businesses that are driving Wisconsin's manufacturing-heavy economy and what strategies or programs they'll need to succeed in the next 10 to 15 years. The \$200,000 study was initiated by the Wisconsin Manufacturing Extension Partnership, the Madison nonprofit that consults manufacturers on lean manufacturing, quality systems, supply chain management, strategic repositioning and product development.

The study is being funded by an undisclosed foundation and the federal Economic Development Administration, said Mike Klonsinski, the manufacturing extension's executive director. The Manufacturing Performance Institute of Cleveland is conducting the study and the results will be reported by April 1, he said.

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