



Training Provides Competitive Edge for Mississippi Furniture Industry

By Karen Brasher

A new program is helping Mississippi's furniture industry overcome increasing competition from imports.

The workforce training and development program is a combined effort of Mississippi State University, the Tupelo-based Community Development Foundation and Itawamba Community College.

Mississippi is losing furniture-manufacturing jobs to overseas competitors, explained MSU research professor Liam Leightley, principal investigator for the project.

"In order to effectively compete in today's environment, our furniture industry must make gains in product quality, production efficiency and service," Leightley said. "Countries such as China enjoy several cost advantages over U.S. furniture manufacturers, including low wage rates, fewer environmental and government regulations, and lower costs for expansion. As these countries continue to improve product quality and reduce transport times, the threat to U.S. manufacturers will intensify."

Funded by a Department of Labor grant, the two-year program is designed to help the state's furniture industry stay competitive by focusing on training identified by the industry, said Todd Beadles, director of workforce development for the Community Development Foundation.

"Top executives from some of Mississippi's leading furniture manufacturers provided detailed information on the industry's workforce development and training needs," he said. "They indicated that the most pressing needs are in the areas of ergonomics, health and safety, leadership, motivation and performance management."

Ergonomics refers to human capabilities in relationship to work demands.

Participating employees come from companies based in the north Mississippi counties of Alcorn, Benton, Calhoun, Chickasaw, Clay, Itawamba, Lafayette, Lee, Lowndes, Marshall, Monroe, Oktibbeha, Pontotoc, Prentiss, Tippah, Tishomingo and Union. About 95 percent of the furniture produced in Mississippi comes from those counties.

Interest surveys were mailed to more than 160 furniture manufacturers in the target area to gauge interest in specific training programs, including ergonomics, health and safety, lean manufacturing, product design, soft skills and computer literacy.

The training sessions are led by personnel from MSU's Forest and Wildlife Research Center and College of Agriculture and Life Science, as well as from Itawamba Community College's (ICC) Workforce Development and Training and Workforce Investment Network (WIN) programs.

"The workforce training and development program will improve employee attitudes, create higher retention rates, lessen absenteeism and improve efficiency," Beadles said. "The improved efficiencies will enable expansions and increased productivity, resulting in more jobs and a higher income earning potential for employees with improved skills,"

The training is provided on a first-come, first-served basis for management, supervisory and production staff members from furniture production and supply industries in north Mississippi. Sessions are held at manufacturing sites, ICC's Advanced Education Center in Tupelo and county WIN centers. Potential participants include management, supervisory and production staff members.

Al Wiygul, president of Bauhaus USA, a La-Z-Boy company based in Salttillo, said the future of north Mississippi's business and industry depends on a trained and skilled workforce.

"Opportunities such as this help us further train and prepare that workforce to meet our current and future needs," Wiygul said. "It is actions such as this that will help keep furniture jobs in north Mississippi."

John Harris (top photo), Helen Wardlaw (center photo) and Marcus Stoval (bottom photo) move furniture through the assembly lines at Flexsteel Industries in Starkville.

