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Got Lean skills?

Implementing a Lean manufacturing strategy may have given you an excruciating headache, but the things you learned along the way are hot commodities in today's job market.

As companies get pickier in selecting their employees, having Lean manufacturing experience could turn a few heads among those with hiring power, said Terry Hindmarch, managing partner at TowerHunter, a Phoenix-based executive recruiting firm.

"The change in the corporate culture is extensive," he said. "We have seen requests for these skills double over the last year."

Lean manufacturing — the practice of promoting factory efficiency by eliminating wasted steps and simplifying processes — has been a popular concept for several years. Still, companies have been slow to dedicate resources to the initiative, according to Boston-based Aberdeen Group Inc. (see story on page 60). Their hesitancy stems from the extensive change that is required in corporate culture, the need to integrate other organizations beyond manufacturing, and a lack of senior executive commitment, the research firm found.

But now, as competition bears down and pressure mounts to reduce costs, companies that once relied on the know-how of Lean consultants want those skills in-house, said Hindmarch.

Like most business decisions, it comes down to economics. If the program has shown initial promise and seems likely to continue to deliver return on investment, why keep paying consultants to do the job? Why not hire someone with hands-on experience to take internal Lean principles to the next stage?

"When companies were first doing this, they used consultants to help them set it up," Hindmarch said. "Companies now realize that if they make the investment and pick the right person, they will get four times that in return on investment."

There are a few specific areas in which employers are looking for people with a knack for these complex practices.

On the lowest level, some companies are hoping to get a Lean coordinator or manager into the rank and file, said Hindmarch. These are people who are trained in the ABCs of Lean manufacturing and know how to explain it to others.

Moving up, manufacturers are also seeking people who combine the knowledge of Lean manufacturing with a vast amount of experience. Usually slated for a middle-management or plant manager position, the person with these skill sets should also have a

deep knowledge of the concepts as well as previous implementation responsibilities and an ability to drive change across an organization.

On the executive level, companies also want general managers and people at the vice presidential level who will be the "champions of the process," he said.

"These are the individuals with the know-how [and] the ability to turn around operations," Hindmarch said.

— *Jennifer Baljko*