



During chaos, Just in Time shines as a competitive weapon




By Lesa Nichols, LNC

Some of us have been hunkered down, isolating in place over the last year. Small manufacturers have not been part of that group. While continuing to produce and ship us the products we clamor for, thousands of the manufacturers across the country have been desperately trying to hang on to their businesses. For many of them, the fight was lost. Why? Covid wipeouts of the workforce, drastic loss of business, too much reliance on the bank, price hikes for raw materials and supply shortages.

I was in the “hunkered down” group so it has been almost a year since I have been able to walk the shop floor with Brad Frank and his team at Tulsa Tube Bending in Oklahoma. We have stayed in close contact; I have seen the artifacts from the shop floor as they have waged a war on the legacy of batch and queue production. Nothing prepared me for the shock I experienced when observing they have:

- Consolidated equipment into approximately 2/3 of what they used before, freeing up more than enough space to start another factory. More than once they moved multiple workstations with tooling and equipment weighing up to 35,000 pounds. It is as if these mammoth machines have sprouted wings.
- Implemented hundreds of small improvements and several massive ones to improve in-process quality, ergonomics for team members and tackled the normal headaches of making products in a continuous flow.
- Adjusted roles of everyone in the company to focus on increasing sales, diversifying markets, developing new products, and improving the flexibility of operations.
- Implemented one of the strongest shop floor problem solving systems I have ever seen (outside of Toyota). The CEO’s frequent refrain, “Don’t go to your wallet as your first answer to a problem.” has a direct correlation here.
- Created a quick and easy method to show the daily profitability and performance of each product line.

These are serious gains across every product line in the business! Look at a few of their results:

-  Customer Complaints – 47%
-  Productivity – 56% (no layoffs),
Throughput – 40%
-  Increased cross training and ability to pivot quickly

All of this was accomplished despite significantly reduced product volume.

How they did this is a much longer story. The celebration for now is that they have achieved a Just in Time condition beyond what I thought possible. A bigger celebration is what I heard from person after person- that they are just getting started, better improvements are coming.

As I left the facility, surrounded now by one newly shuttered factory after another, I realized what a tough battle the last year has been. The strategy of Just-in-Time as a competitive weapon is proven again, leaving this determined manufacturer standing tall and resilient.