

# Eastern Washington businesses learning to get lean

The term "lean" generally conjures up images of food or weight loss.

However, these days the term is also being used to describe a way of doing business that maximizes production output and minimizes waste. In the spring of 2005, several businesses in the Spokane area got together and formed a group to encourage lean business practices called Inland Northwest Lean Management Consortium.

Michael Schneider of Washington Manufacturing Services and a board member of Inland Northwest LMC described the Spokane group as a "self-help networking organization for businesses that are interested in or are currently practicing lean management principles." Their mission is to seek out and promote the best lean management practices in business, with the goal of strengthening each participating individual and member organization, while positively impacting the regional economy.

Member companies meet monthly in Spokane at the Spokane Intercollegiate

Research and Technology Institute and occasionally take turns hosting tours of their facilities. During the tours, hosting companies highlight the lean principles they have put into practice.



**Joni Dron**

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The concept of lean production was originally developed by Taiichi Ohno for Toyota and the manufacture of automobiles. Also known at the Toyota Production system, the concept has since been adopted by companies all over the world. Ohno said "The goal of lean production is all about getting the right things to the right place at the right time, the first time, while minimizing waste and being open to change." In addition to eliminating waste, Ohno's ideas have led to better quality and improved

product flow.

AREVA, a member of Inland Northwest LMC with a presence in Richland, has used lean management practices for several years. AREVA is a world-wide energy company that offers technological solutions for nuclear power generation and electricity transmission and distribution. They started with basic concepts and tools such as 5S, which speaks of having a clean and orderly workplace, and value-stream mapping, which looks at a process from start to finish with a goal of eliminating excess time or other types of waste. By applying these basic concepts, AREVA has seen improved cycle times of 10 percent to 70 percent in many of their processes as well as an improvement in quality.

Bob Link, manager of environmental safety and health for AREVA NC, Inc. in Richland said, "Becoming lean is a journey of continuous improvement with many tools and levels of sophistication." He continued, "Having a forum to discuss lean with others is valuable as you can learn tricks from your col-

leagues that you may not have thought of."

"I am very surprised at how quickly Inland Northwest LMC has caught on," said Schneider. "The membership has become quite broad-based, going beyond large global manufacturing companies to include smaller companies with a more regional market such as banks, food processors and medical clinics."

The Inland Northwest LMC now has approximately 60 member companies and monthly meetings draw around 100 people. According to Schneider, the organization is seeking greater penetration throughout Eastern Washington and would welcome Tri-City businesses and others in Eastern Washington to join their group.

For more information on Inland Northwest LMC go to [www.inlandnwlm.com](http://www.inlandnwlm.com).

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