

STRUCTURAL BUILDING COMPONENTS MAGAZINE

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Free Money! How to Get Government Grant\$ & Funding for Training Program\$ by Molly E. Butz

When budget cuts become a necessity, training and education are often the first to be cut. Learn how you can remain in training mode, even if the budget's well is dried up.

Unfortunately, when money is tight, many companies choose to make cuts in their training budgets. In an ever and quickly growing industry, it's critical to realize that keeping your training current can make or break your sales and service as they relate to expanding technologies and a shallow skilled labor pool. Government money is helping WTCA members stay in the game. Across the country, component manufacturers are finding local funding that's helping them to stay on the cutting edge by offering reimbursements for all kinds of training, from truss technician and safety courses to updated accounting and bookkeeping classes.

GOOD NEWS/BAD NEWS

Training budget cuts aren't an option, that's the bad news. The good news is that grants and funding for training reimbursement can come from a number of places, from state and county governments to the decision-makers in your cities and towns. Matt Pettit, General Manager and Vice President of Eckman Lumber Company, Inc., has been on the receiving end of exactly this type of funding. "I just want to stress the availability of 'free money,'" said Pettit. "It's available for everyone and you can do a lot of things, from training and evaluations, even as far down as learning how to answer the phones. It's just a matter of finding it."

Eckman Lumber has been fortunate in finding people to help along the way. As a client of the Manufacturers Resource Center (MRC) in Pennsylvania, Eckman Lumber and Pettit have had the help of Ms. Lee Bond, Manufacturing Extension Manager with MRC.

"Lee has been a tremendous asset to the company; she's part of the team," Pettit told SBC staff. "We work with Lee at MRC, but she works in conjunction with the Manufacturing Association of Mideast Pennsylvania as well as other manufacturing organizations, such as the Pennsylvania Technical Assistance Program (PENN-TAP) and the National Institute of Standards and Technology Manufacturing Extension Partnership (NIST MEP)." Pettit continued, "She finds the grants and the funding and helps us fill out the paperwork, then she helps us find the people to get the training done." Pettit's training has included, specifically, the WTCA safety training program as well as 12 months of corporate access to Truss Technician Training Levels I, II and III through WTCA's Truss Knowledge Online (TKO).

Pettit's plant has benefited in more areas than just training. "Lee can find people to help us do

testing in our plants as well," Pettit explained. "We need noise, airborne particle and audiometric testing done. We've even had a plant-wide voluntary safety inspection."

Working with an organization such as MRC has also given Pettit access not only to industry specific training through WTCA, but also to people with all manners of expertise, like Bill Paletski of PENNTAP, who conducted Eckman's voluntary inspection. Not only is Paletski a registered professional engineer (PE), a qualified environmental professional (QEP) and a registered environmental professional (REP), he's also an authorized trainer for OSHA's ten and 30-hour General Industry training. In addition to the safety knowledge that Paletski has provided, he has helped Eckman qualify for the Pennsylvania State five percent workers' compensation discount for the last two years.

MRC is a non-profit organization whose mission is to help small and mid-size manufacturers enhance their ability to compete successfully by providing them with consulting, education and strategic partnering. Eckman does pay a fee to MRC, but to Pettit, it's a minimal amount in the grand scheme of things. "A lot of things are available and the way the labor force is these days, organizations like WTCA and MRC help you offer your new employees education; it makes them part of the team," said Pettit. "They want to learn and by having the funding you can take a guy and send him on a one-hour training mission, and when he comes back, he makes a difference at the company."

Pettit realizes how crucial it is to spend the time and money on "the guys in the trenches, because they're ultimately the ones that make the money for the company." But at the same time, he knows that he's barely touched the tip of the iceberg and when it's the iceberg of free money, it's worth the time.

An organization like MRC can provide all types of resources and assistance for companies like Eckman. Lee Bond recommends finding the Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP) center near your facility. "I see it all the time," says Bond, "Companies are afraid, but if you can find a MEP center, it will give you more time and you can bring in the knowledge that you need to find the grants and funding." Bond describes it as "streamlining the process, from who does the training and the approximate costs, to how many people, how many hours and at what level the training should be done."

"Then we just walk him through the process," Bond explained. "Through MRC, Matt's company has access to thousands of grants and consultants and we also keep a database for training options." Bond also helped Matt secure the funding for his training through WTCA by locating the kind of grants that he would need to keep his technicians up to speed and get him involved with the WTCA safety training program.

This all sounds great, but you may be thinking that once you've located the grants you'd like to apply for you'll be totally lost. Never fear. Managers like Bond can help with that too. "We walk the company through the procedure, ask them to provide specific information and then prepare the applications for them," Bond described. "We meet on a quarterly basis and make a 'game plan.' I find out what help they need or an area they need assistance. Sometimes it's not even workforce development—maybe it's an emergency plan or disaster training."

All in all, Bond agrees that it's not optional, it's a necessity. "I think training is invaluable. At this point, you have to be investing in your workforce, because if you don't there is always someone right behind you who will be," Bond concluded.

The best part is that a little research on your part can take you a long way. What you'll find, if you take the time, is that almost all states offer some kind of training reimbursement. Some require a matching investment from the company and most specify what type of employee or training qualifies for reimbursement, but the bottom line is that there is plenty of money to be had, you just have to look.

You can look even closer to home and find organizations that do the same kind of work as MRC. Rick Parrino, General Manager and Vice President of Plum Building Systems, found an organization in his county to help him secure some funding. The Clark County Development Corporation, made up of local business owners, was founded to help stimulate business and bring new business to town. Much like Eckman, Plum Building Systems pays dues to the organization each year, but in return has gotten a bundle of help.

Parrino has secured thousands of dollars that he can use to train new employees or use to bring existing employees up to speed. And make no mistake, he's excited. "It's great, and it covers everything," Parrino said. "Anything related to training gets reimbursed: classes, travel costs, room and board, even registration for BCMC! The money is held in a trust by the local college. When the training is finished, I bring the receipts in and we walk through the expenses. So far, I haven't had anything get turned down, and then a couple of weeks later the check comes in the mail," Parrino added. He also recalls that some of the funding provided when his facility was originally built was used to assist in the costs associated with several Truss Technician Training courses that were, at the time, still only offered as live classroom courses.

"The interesting thing," Parrino explained, "is that [your business] doesn't need to be expanding. As long as you can show that you're growing, you can get more funding at anytime. And you know what they say, 'If you're in manufacturing and you're not growing, you're dead.'" Parrino clarified by adding that increased sales are a necessity, otherwise "your other costs are going to pass you up, even in a downsizing market. Everything from insurance costs to the costs of your raw materials will go up, and if you're not selling more than the year before, your competitor will."

Investing in your employees can mean big returns for your company. Research has shown that employees tend to choose a job where they are happy over a bigger paycheck. And, training your employees will have an impact, not only on productivity, but on your bottom line, too. Really, it comes down to the old adage, "if you think education is expensive, try ignorance." Moreover, if you're not willing to spend the money on training, you can guarantee your competitors will.

Every state has at least one Manufacturing Extension Partnership Center, many states have organizations like MRC and your local business development corporation is a great place to start. Do some research, get some help, just don't wait another day. It's out there, but it's not going to find you. Think of it like the lottery (with a lot better odds); you can't win if you don't play!

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