



Innovator Interview: Jean Dean Northwest Woolen Mills, The Brickle Group, Production Manager

Jean Dean is the production manager for Northwest Woolen Mills, The Brickle Group, a textiles manufacturer. She spoke with the GPL about her work with Real Jobs, Rhode Island's workforce development program.

This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

What are some of the main challenges that small- and medium-sized manufacturers face?

Jean Dean: When you're dealing with manufacturing, we have staffing that has a lot of turnover because our production goes up and down. We deal a lot with temporary help, which means that we're dealing with people who have not experienced manufacturing. They don't know how to work with each other, how to communicate effectively on a regular basis, or how to have that follow-through and that drive.

Tell us about working with the state's workforce development program Real Jobs Rhode Island

Real Jobs and The Brickle Group partnered together with a training program to give employees on the floor who have potential the training necessary in order for them to be more effective and move forward with projects we otherwise would not have been able to do.

What is one example of the program's impact?

We're trying to work with people to help them build their careers within our organization so that we can have qualified people to move up to different levels within our company. One employee started off sewing as a temp back in 2010. Over the years, as our company developed, we realized that she was a natural-born leader. We recognized her potential early. She was bilingual and a good communicator when we were trying to get information across to the other employees. Every challenge we've given her, she's taken and gone with. And now, she's at a point where I'm hoping that someday she'll be able to take over the floor. Now that she has gone through the training, people on the floor are seeing the benefits and are more open to training.

Would you recommend this type of workforce development collaboration with employers to other states?

Jean: When I go to industry events, other manufacturers say they run into the same issues, and we talk about the fact that there are not enough people out there who are trained in this specific industry. Real Jobs Rhode Island bridges that gap. When I talk to people in other manufacturing organizations, I tell them that Real Jobs Rhode Island has the ability to train the people that we need with the staff we have right here and right now. Even though I'm losing employees on the floor for a little bit of time, the knowledge that they're bringing back helps us to do new projects that I wouldn't have had the talent to do before.