

Oak Ridge Centers for Manufacturing Technology – testimonials

The first testimonial for the successful Oak Ridge Centers for Manufacturing Technology came from Mitchell Burnett. Mitch was among the first hourly paid employees, an electrician, to join the ORCMT staff. His initial involvement was in an office in Oak Ridge at Mitchell Road, where he answered phone calls and helped get the paperwork started on Technical Assistance requests.

Mitch recalls to this day the goal of this program: “to save American manufacturing jobs by solving tough problems encountered in the manufacturing process.” He says this with a great deal of pride. He also indicated that my call to him brought back a lot of great memories.

He truly believes that the program did save jobs and did create opportunities for the American manufacturing industry to grow and to continue to operate because of the tough manufacturing problems solved through interaction with ORCMT. Mitch became one of the most effective ambassadors for the program.

Brian Shanks was the Technical Assistance program director, and he took special interest in Mitch and before too long had him covering the whole gamut of necessary actions and decisions to fulfill the assistance requests. Brian went on vacation and when he returned he found Mitch had kept the job going quite well, so he just told Mitch to go ahead and fill the task requests since he knew many of the people who could provide the needed help.

This worked out really well for Mitch. At that time, 1994, he had just returned from a bout with cancer, and the opportunity to function in an atmosphere where he answered the phone and worked with people in need of technical assistance was an excellent fit for Mitch. He naturally communicated well and quickly put the callers at ease with the process of getting technical assistance from the program.

Mitch said, “Working at ORCMT was one of the best experiences in my time at Y-12. We were helping save jobs in the American workforce and had excellent feedback on the results our assistances had on the customers. Each customer was contacted at specific time intervals with questions about the number of jobs saved or created and the monetary benefit our assistance had.”

Mitch continued, “We worked with both Y-12 and X-10 personnel to find the expertise that would help the customer. We were able to spend \$5,000 on each assistance and then if the customer could see the benefit, they were able to enter into a Work for Others agreement. This resulted in millions of dollars of work generated for Y-12 and X-10 every year. We saved outside jobs and jobs in the complex. It was a great win/win situation.”

Finally Mitch told of a most rewarding experience he had. He said, “One of the calls I took was for a medical facility that could be used in a battlefield situation, set up quickly, taken down and reused. This was to replace the old field hospitals that had been used for many years.

“Because it was for another government department, we could not use the Technical Assistance money and this went directly to Work for Others. The first part of this project resulted in almost a million dollars for the Work for Others program.

“This was named ASSTC, Advanced Surgical Suite for Trauma Casualties or ‘Hospital in a Box’, and was so successful that other work came from the military for other projects using this basic design.”

We have a model of this “hospital in a box” located in the Y-12 History Center, and it attracts the attention of visitors. We have a demonstration video that shows it being set up quickly. This project that Mitch served as the initial contact has resulted in substantial improvements to the military’s ability to more effectively respond to battlefield situations.

The second person to respond was Brian Shanks. He was also involved in the Technical Assistance program and helped begin the effort.

Brian said, "I started with ORCMT while D.H. Johnson was over the department. We started with a 'wing and a prayer.' No one had ever worked a program like this before. We started with a 1-800 number and traveled to many industrial shows to get our name out to industry nationwide." (NOTE: This 1-800 number Brian mentions had a unique designation. It was 1-800-356-4872. If you look at the phone pad, the last four digits could stand for "4USA" and could be said as "for USA." Before texting was using such shortcuts, ORCMT was making use of the concept! Ray)

Brian continued, "Many people had the same question, 'How can you help us at no cost and what do you get out of it?' We tried to explain what we do here at Y-12 and that the program was a grant from congress to help American small business get competitive with the foreign market. It was also intended to help create manufacturing jobs in the **USA**."

"The funny part was that once we worked with a small company, word of mouth quickly spread and we were unable to answer all the calls that came in. We could only take the company's information during the work day and would call them back to get a better idea of the manufacturing problem after hours. The job was so much fun we never noticed we had stayed over in the evening sometimes three or four hours just so we could get back to the company and get a more detailed description of the problem."

Now how about that? Such fun work that the people became so engrossed in the job that they forgot to go home!

To continue Brian's story, "The way the program worked a company would call 1-800-356-4USA and describe their problem, situation or what was going wrong for them. We had access to anyone in the three facilities (Y-12, X-10 or K-25) who had expertise in the field of the manufacturing problem and was willing to work with a company to help resolve the problem."

"Once someone agreed to work with the outside business we would issue a charge number so the Principal Investigator, as we called them, could charge all costs involved to our program. This was usually about \$5,000. We could allow additional charges if the PI thought a little more effort would solve the problem."

"We were only allowed to work with small companies with less than 500 employees. Although I cannot give you the names of our customers from memory, we had so many success stories we could talk for the next month and still have several months to talk." (I don't doubt that a bit...we have literally books filled with the success stories. One of them is arranged by State! I believe Dave Beck insisted on this arrangement. Thanks Dave, it is most helpful to my research!)

Brain continued, "Once our work through Technical Assistance was finished, we asked if there was a project they would like us to help with but on a Work-for-Others basis. The first year we brought in several million dollars. If memory serves me it was \$34 million."

"For a long time we were able to work with outside businesses with just a hand shake, no contract, no signed agreement other than a Confidentiality Agreement. We earned their trust."

As with many good ideas, this arrangement did not last. The legal ramifications of such "handshake work" could not be continued for the long haul. Requirements for assuring the proper accounting methods were used complicated matters significantly. While this was a necessary thing, it was frustrating to the folks trying to just help people solve their tough manufacturing problems.

As was the case with the Training and Technology School series, the people involved in ORCMT are coming forward with the details of the history of this highly successful program. We will also include stories about the Manufacturing Skills Campus history. It was also a very significant element of ORCMT.

Please contact me at smithdr@y12.doe.gov or 865-851-6423 with your memories of ORCMT!