Abstract: The project developed a curriculum to improve productivity along with follow-up classes and services to help small meat processors in Iowa. The lessons covered scheduling, product mix decisions, retail inventory management, and shop floor performance measurement.

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Improving profitability for small and very small meat processors in Iowa

Offering classes for processors and providing individual follow-up sessions can help implement solutions offered during classes. Small and very small meat plants can learn to use the competitive advantages they have when compared to bigger meat packing plants.

What was done and why?
In 2009, a small productivity improvement project was conducted for meat processing plants in north central Iowa. It proved to be so effective for the pilot plants that this new project was proposed to continue and expand the knowledge to other Iowa small meat processing plants. The idea was to make the information easily usable for meat plant managers (beyond merely publishing articles).

The initial objectives of this project were to:
• Develop a plant productivity curriculum,
• Conduct quarterly one-day plant productivity classes at four regional Iowa locations, and
• Provide one-on-one follow-up services to people who attended the class.

What did we learn?
One objective was to make the classes available to as many meat plants as possible. Instead of offering classes given in each region of Iowa, a shortage of labor time and travel funds required the project leaders to seek other ways to share their knowledge. They concluded that a good solution would be the development of a webinar, hosted online through the Niche Meat Processor Association Network starting in August 2014. This will make the course available nationally. See: http://www.nichemeatprocessing.org/

Custom lockers are extremely busy in the fall during deer hunting season. In fact, most custom lockers rely on revenues from this busy season to subsidize an entire year’s cash flow. It also means that these plants are working significantly under capacity for at least three other months of the year, while labor, overhead, and other general costs continue to be generated. This leads to significant cash flow issues during the slow season. One key accomplishment was development of a slow season solution for custom lockers. This solution centered on aggressive sales and advertising during the slow season with the understanding that every dollar generated over raw material costs would add to the bottom line during the slow season when excess capacity was available.