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By :

NEW BEGINNING IN CHICOUTIMI

It was an unhappy period in the history of Chlorophylle, a successful outdoor clothing manufacturer making high-end products in Chicoutimi, in the picturesque Saguenay region of Quebec, when the company proposed installing a modular production system to improve productivity, the employees went on strike. Unable to settle the dispute, management decided to close the manufacturing facility in Chicoutimi and contract out its sewing operations.

But there is a happy ending to the story: recognizing that its former employees were the best workforce to manufacture its complex products, Chlorophylle suggested the employees create their own company, and offered them preferential treatment as a contractor for the first two years, to get them started.

The new workers' co-operative, calling itself Perséide, knew it must install the most efficient production system to win Chlorophylle and other companies' contracts. After visiting several manufacturing facilities, Perséide settled on a Toyota Sewn Production System (TSS). Once it raised funding of \$600,000, including investments by 23 members of the co-op, the group's new factory was equipped with the TSS system, supplied by Canadian distributor Bejicel. Four teams were set up: three to sew the highly complicated jackets (up to 200 minutes labor), and another to sew pants and simpler items.

Bernard Berzi of Bejicel says the TSS system allows the co-op to change styles quickly to react to schedule changes or customer requirements. "Some people believe TSS will only work in simple high-volume product lines," he comments. "But at Perséide it works well on highly complex products with many variations between the different styles." He also notes the new standing workstations have been well-accepted by the sewers, and the special training program developed by TSS has empowered the teams, who can make a lot of decision for themselves.

Elisabeth Duchesne, President of the co-op, says: "Our quality has improved because the teams take responsibility and are proud of their work." Each team give itself a daily production goal, constantly trying to beat its previous 'best day.' Operators are paid on an hourly basis and there is no bonus plan, yet productivity has risen from an average of 70 per cent to 91 per cent in just five months.

Chlorophylle, which now contracts up to 20 per cent of its production to Perséide (60 per cent is made by other Canadian contractors, and 20 per cent is imported) is very happy with the arrangement. "We have better production costs this way," notes General Manager Laval Tremblay. "We can concentrate on developing our products." Now that the co-op is established, it is accepting work from other apparel companies. In a highly competitive contractor market, Perséide Confection, named after a meteor shower, is hoping to be the new shooting star.