MSA values Pitt partnership, pleased with students' work

One project completed each year through Katz

BY MALIA SPENCER

Mine Safety Appliances has worked with students in the University of Pittsburgh's Katz Graduate School of Business for the past three years as a way to make connections with promising students and get outside perspective on a problem or challenge.

The company also maintains a working relationship with Carnegie Mellon University's Tepper School of Business.

Tom Merriman, manager of North American logistics for MSA, spoke to the Business Times about his experiences with the Katz program.

What projects have students worked on?

MSA has had a partnership with the Katz Graduate School for the past three years, completing one project each year.

The projects we submitted for analysis by the students include analyzing how MSA could improve delivery to one of our largest customers, improving delivery in two of our distribution centers in Canada without increasing inventory, and reviewing MSA's stocking and delivery strategy for one of our most popular head protection products.

What were their solutions, and were their suggestions at all surprising to you?

In all three assignments, the suggestions submitted to MSA by the Katz students represented outstanding work on the part of everyone involved.

Their suggestions were not necessarily surprising, as in each scenario, we actually identified possible courses of action and asked them to determine which would be in the best interest for MSA.

Throughout our partnership with the Katz Graduate School, we've implemented all or part of each team's proposal and have been very pleased with the outcome, as we have since improved delivery and streamlined some distribution processes, saving MSA hundreds of thousands of dollars on an annual basis.

Why did the company opt to use student work instead of hiring a "professional" consultant or doing the work in-house?

Utilizing outside resources brings fresh views and perspective. That can be said for both students and professionals.

But in some instances, students tend to be more open and creative with their approach.

These creative views may not ultimately be the suggestions we implement, but the discussion and interaction with the staff at MSA makes everyone involved think differently and outside of the box.

Was saving money a major component of the decision?

Cost reduction was a consideration, but it certainly wasn't the only factor for us in deciding which proposal, or which parts of a proposal, to implement.

We also looked at other benefits, including improvements in processes, delivery and distribution performance, inventory turns, and, of course, the impact of these decisions on overall customer satisfaction.

What is it like working with students as opposed to a consulting firm? Do you have to change your approach at all?

Working with the students requires assigning a project that can be completed in one semester, which in the business world can be a very short amount of time.

Completing a project within that tight of a time frame requires us to work collaboratively with the students, assisting them any way we can.

While working with a consultant would also include collaborative work, it tends to be less "hands-on."

We do feel, however, that working with the Katz Graduate School benefits both MSA and the students, as both groups learn and experience new and diverse situations.

Have you been able to make any permanent hires as a result of these partnerships?

While we cannot guarantee a full-time job at the completion of the project, this does happen when the opportunity is right.

When there is no room for a full-time position, we have been able to hire some of the students as contract employees working on a part-time basis while they remain in school.

This approach has worked out well for both MSA and the students, as we have been able to work with very qualified and talented people who now know MSA.

Are you planning to continue working with these classes?

Absolutely. This is a program that is truly a benefit to all involved.

mspencer@biijournals.com | (412) 208-3829 | @PIT_Malia