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 **Editorial**

**Helping Manufacturers Break the Mold**

There are a number of intriguing initiatives underway to help grow and strengthen the region's precision-manufacturing sector — everything from a project involving UMass Amherst that will drive innovation, to a conference this fall aimed at spotlighting this sector and keeping business in this region.


But perhaps the most promising endeavor is a recently launched collaborative involving four small area manufacturers. If successful — and everyone involved with this believes it will be — the collaborative will enable these companies to vie for contracts that they could not get on their own while also making them more competitive in the global marketplace.

One participant calls the collaborative a "prototype," one that could, and hopefully will, become a model for other companies in this region to follow.

Here's how it works: The four companies, Boulevard Machine and Gear and Thorn Industries, both in Springfield; Mechanical Drive Components Inc. (MDC) in Chicopee; and Creative Machining and Molding Corp. (CMMC) in Westfield, will market themselves as the Pioneer Valley Precision Manufacturing Collaborative. There will be a Web site developed for the group, and it will be one of the lead tools used to help steer business to the collaborative and its individual members.

In theory, and it's a very sound theory, the collaborative will enable four very small companies with under 20 employees each to take on the look, feel, philosophy, and capabilities of one, much larger enterprise. Thus, these companies can get pieces of contracts that would otherwise

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be beyond their reach.

Why is this collaborative so important to the region and its precision-manufacturing sector? There are several reasons, but mostly it comes down to demographics. Indeed, while there are some large and very successful companies in the Western Mass. market, such as Hoppe Tool, Berkshire Industries, and Advanced Manufacturing, most are much smaller players that have cultivated niches for many years.

For Boulevard, that niche is aerospace and making parts for companies such as Hamilton Sundstrand, For Thorn, it's medical-device work for customers such as Johnson & Johnson. MDC does work for several end-users, including NASCAR teams and National Hot Rod Assoc. members, and CMMC makes everything from holders for Yankee Candle products to parts for credit card readers.

These niches have served the companies well, but, in some ways, they limit growth opportunities. By bringing four diverse companies together — in what one participant called a “merger that isn't really a merger” — the collaborative can open doors that might otherwise be closed.

And if enough doors are opened, then an historically significant sector of the region's economy, precision manufacturing, which traces its roots to the opening of the Springfield Armory more than two centuries ago, can be an important part of the future, and not just a thing of the past.

This is significant because, as we've said many times, while the region is trying to create new business sectors or clusters, such as clean energy and bioscience, it must also commit time, energy, and resources to growing an already-solid employer such as precision manufacturing.

As we said at the top, there are a number of ongoing efforts that fall into that category. All of them bear watching, but the Pioneer Valley Precision Manufacturing Collaborative is extremely intriguing because of its potential to make small companies become much bigger in terms of their presence in the marketplace.