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GE shows off energy efficiency steps

By Gordon Dritschilo
Staff Writer

Efficiency Vermont wants local businesses to know they can do a lot more than change light bulbs.

The nonprofit used its work with GE in a presentation Wednesday as an example of what it could do for other Vermont companies. The presentation included a tour of GE's North Clarendon facility, where visitors saw some of the energy-saving technologies in action.

Efficiency Vermont director Jim Merriam said the group had reorganized in the last year and was focusing on being more customer-friendly.

"We realize we can't pop in, do a lighting project and leave," he said. "We need to develop a relationship with the facility."

Drew Hamer, a GE employee, described how the company and organization started in 2007 by replacing 1,165 lights, saving \$211,212 in electricity and getting better light in the factory. Light replacement was repeatedly described as "low-hanging fruit" during the presentation.

Hamer said another focus was on replacing oversized equipment with more appropriate pieces.

"We used to put this in an oven that was about 8 feet in diameter," GE employee William Welch said as he held up an object roughly the size and shape of a Tootsie roll.

Behind him on the factory floor, a robot arm was moving the slugs between a smaller, 4-foot wide oven and a press where they were molded into equipment parts. The smaller oven cut power use by roughly three-quarters, Welch said. Hamer put the savings at \$82,837.

In 2009, the company replaced a ventilation system that was no longer needed because the company no longer used lead in certain production processes. Simpler, cheaper systems using less energy took their place.

"When you make process changes, a lot of times you don't go back and make sure your infrastructure matches the new process," Hamer said.

In 2010, the company looked at reducing the amount of compressed air it uses. Hamer said many people incorrectly assume that compressed air is essentially free, when in fact the compression holds a significant energy cost. He said using certain electrical systems instead is much cheaper.

Charles Barker of GE told the visitors not to focus on the specifics but on the theme behind them.

"You may not have box ovens, you may not have diaphragm pumps, but chances are you have compressed air," he said. "You might have equipment that's not the right size."

Doug Manning, senior engineering specialist for Energizer Battery, said the talk reinforced a number of ideas his company was putting into practice with Efficiency Vermont at its plants in Bennington and Saint Albans.

"I'd like to say we've even gone a little further in some aspects," he said.

James Stewart, Rutland Economic Development Corporation executive director, said he promotes Efficiency Vermont to local businesses.

"This is one of the things I make sure they know is available," he said. "I think there is a perception out there that lighting change-out is what they do. That's an easy first step, but if you want to get the best out of it, it takes a broader look at your operation. That's what GE is doing."

@Tagline:gordon.dritschilo

@rutlandherald.com
