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How has the COVID crisis affected SEAMS' members?

By Devin Steele

The coronavirus pandemic had multiple effects on SEAMS' members – some good, some not so good – whether or not they pivoted into Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) manufacturing, maintained production of their typical product lines or were shuttered altogether.

So this month, we wanted to find out from members how they have fared throughout COVID-19, what changes they may have made to deal with the crisis and whether or not things are returning to “normal.” Following are reports from respondents.

America Knits

America Knits (AK), which opened its doors in Swainsboro, GA, late last year, couldn't have predicted a pandemic in its near future – but the crisis has allowed the company to learn a lot about its capabilities as a fledgling start-up.

Indeed, like numerous other SEAMS' members, America Knits joined the effort to address the shortage of PPE, joining in the Parkdale/Hanesbrands coalition early on. The company started cutting and sewing masks flown to its plant in March. At that point, AK needed to put its “normal” business on hold, according to company President Steve Hawkins.

“We spoke with our customers and informed them of what we, as an American company ‘needed to do,’ and I must say, every one of them allowed us to push ‘pause’ and transition our factory to 100 percent mask production, not knowing when we would be able to return to producing normal product,” he said.

Within weeks, America Knits, along with its coalition partners, started developing many fabrics and prototypes to make isolation gowns. That shift required much production and allowed the company to actually grow, he said. Today, the company is up to 85 employees and is running at about 50 percent higher volume than before the crisis began. It is still producing masks and gowns, along with bouffant scrub caps and booties – all reusable, Hawkins said.

About four weeks ago America Knits started a T-shirt line for Recover Brands, one of its premium customers based in Charlotte, NC.

“We fully believe that for the foreseeable future, medical apparel will be the main focus, including a special collaboration with ‘Field To Closet’ to produce a very special 100 percent cotton line of scrubs,” he said. “Ed Jernigan, who heads that organization, along with the state of Georgia have planned this launch while featuring America Knits as a ‘Georgia Grown’ project that will give back to cotton farmers. Parkdale and Hornwood Mills are working with us to supply all raw materials.”

To help ensure the safety of its employees, America Knits takes employees’ temperatures before they can enter the building, has positioned machines eight feet apart, has placed a special germ-killing mat



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for shoes, cleans machines and sanitizes workstations frequently and has installed social distancing signage throughout the plant.

Hawkins' childhood buddy, Dr. David Talton, a cardiothoracic surgeon practicing in Tupelo, Miss., is an investor in the company and holds the title of vice president – the “doctor” part being a plus for any company transitioning into PPE, Hawkins said.

“Frankly, this pandemic may have led AK in a totally different direction, and who better to have as a partner than Dr. Talton in this change of product line?” he said.

Apex Mills

After shifting its production to focus on PPE when the coronavirus was spreading, Apex Mills has begun to see “normal” production accelerate over the past month or so, according to Jonathan Kurz, President and CEO.

“We are starting to see our customers come back, and we’ve even gained new customers that were looking for mask fabric and fabric to be used in products for home entertainment – golf screens, pool liners, etc.,” he said.

When its normal customer demand was diminished during the pandemic, Apex Mills focused on pivoting to participate in the textile industry’s initiative and to maximize its output of fabrics appropriate for PPE manufacturing, Kurz added. The company, based in Inwood, NY, with manufacturing in Graham, NC, originally had to pause production, reduce shifts and furlough employees, but was quickly able to bring back a majority of its team to develop and manufacture these essential items, he noted.

At the onset of the pandemic, Apex was contacted by the Cleveland Clinic to develop a fabric for their administrative and non-medical professionals. That request quickly escalated into finding a way to make masks for them. Partnering with their team of doctors and professionals, the company developed a mask that exceeded their expectations, Kurz said.

“We then decided to leverage our skills in technical textile development and partnered with specialists in our industry to design and fabricate a face mask that exceeds CDC guidelines for a general-purpose face covering,” he said. “Today, we continue to refine and expand our performance-based face mask line into breathable and lightweight gym masks, gaiters and children’s masks. On a second front, we changed over a large number of machines that had previously manufactured millions of yards for the automotive industry to produce textiles used in the manufacture of disposable hospital gowns.”

When employees were being called back to work, Apex Mills immediately followed CDC guidelines and implemented the safety protocols to prevent the spread of the virus, he added.

Buhler Quality Yarns

Based in Jefferson, GA, Buhler Quality Yarns was deemed essential when COVID-19 was spreading due to the fact its yarns are used in military and medical applications, according to David Sasso, Vice President of International Sales.



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The producer of high-end fibers and yarns has contributed small inputs for PPE, notably for specialized knit-to-shape face masks.

But Buhler did see a few cancellations and orders placed on hold from retailers – but that wasn't a "disaster," Sasso said.

"Even before COVID, our industry had problems with maintaining a workforce," he said. "After COVID, we scaled back operations to run more efficiently and spin to match demand."

The company was forced into layoffs and furloughs as a result, and it is still at the same reduced production level as the early days of the pandemic, he added. Currently, that amounts to about 60 percent to 70 percent of pre-crisis production, he noted. Its markets have stayed the same with a balance between apparel and industrial, he pointed out.

Buhler Quality Yarns doesn't have close proximity between employees in yarn spinning, but for safety purposes, the company does limit the number of employees at the breakroom table, takes temperature checks prior to entering the facility, requires face masks to be worn in the production area and has hand sanitizers available at various locations, Sasso said.

Champion Thread Co.

Champion Thread Co. (CTC), Gastonia, N.C., did not experience any downtime or reductions in production during the pandemic, according to President Matt Poovey. In fact, the company expanded its production operations from a five- to a six-day week and is actively hiring for production and related roles.

How was this possible? He explained.

"Blessed with a healthy backlog of orders, we were able to continue all of our manufacturing and fulfillment operations even though we initially experienced a dip in sales due primarily to uncertainty in the industry, said Poovey, whose company was deemed an Essential Business due in large part to its pre-existing service to the food supply, medical and other essential markets. "Even as some of these concerns continue, the Champion Thread team has persevered by shifting our product mix to meet the changing needs of our clients."

For example, he added, as new orders declined in the apparel segment, demand for PPE-compliant and other non-apparel thread categories has grown, enabling its production to six days a week. While Champion has maintained its focus on supplying threads and engineered yarns, it has pivoted to meet the needs of the large percentage of clients that have shifted production to PPE.

"We attribute this successful transition to the dedication and loyalty of our team members," he said. "Their ownership of their jobs and responsibility to effective teamwork is genuinely remarkable."



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To keep its employees safe, Champion has, in all cases, met or exceeded the federal, state and local healthcare guidelines for regular temperature checks, distancing of team members in the workplace, the use of face masks and other such measures, Poovey said.

The company has also made changes in its employment policies, where needed, he added. For example, it encourages those who may feel sick to stay home.

"Perhaps more importantly, we have strengthened our communications across all our teams to include weekly meetings where anyone can offer suggestions for maintaining a safe and productive workplace," Poovey said. "The response from all CTC team members has been outstanding, with total employee buy-in to our updated policies and procedures that have come from this experience."

Cockpit USA

Cockpit USA, New York City, took a big hit when the coronavirus brought the economy to a near-standstill, according to Jacky Clyman, Executive Vice President and Owner. But, a government PPE loan has helped tremendously, she said.

The company produces Made-in-USA outerwear for men and women, including textile, leather and sheepskin aviation and military-inspired or replica, personalized programs for corporations. It supplies military outerwear to U.S. government agencies as well as international air forces and navies. They also work with TV shows and movies on wardrobe needs. The company was deemed an Essential Business because of the flight jackets it supplies.

"(COVID-19) blew our retail showroom business to zero from mid-March on," said Clyman, adding that the company had to furlough four employees and reduce its workweek to four days. "We received a number of order cancellations."

Currently running at 20 percent less capacity, Cockpit USA has continued to work as closely as it can with its core customers, she pointed out.

For health and safety reasons, the company makes sure its warehouse employees wears masks and asks them not to report to work if they feel sick, she said. In the office, temperatures are checked, stations are separated for social distancing and surfaces are kept as clean as possible.

Complete Converting

Complete Converting, Inc., a Toledo, Ohio-based specialist in sewn packaging products, reported a steep decline as a result of the crisis.

Because its primary products are automotive packaging, the company was not ruled an Essential Business, said company President Donna Kuch. Its plant was shut down for two weeks and the entire staff was laid off due to the state's stay-at-home order. Staggered return to work began in May when the state order was lifted. The company brought the majority of staff back but had to lay off some when work orders were caught up but new orders were not coming in.



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However, while the company was closed, its owners came in to cut and donate mask materials for local hospital and home sewers. They also designed masks for eventual reopening for its staff and customers.

Today, Complete Converting is operating at about 50 percent capacity and has instituted a four-day workweek. It also has implemented a number of hygiene and sanitary measures to ensure employee safety.

Contempora Fabrics

Based in Lumberton, NC, knitter Contempora Fabrics pivoted into PPE production, as has been well reported in the media, and is slowly beginning to see “normal” business return, said President Ron Roach.

The company is currently operating at about 40 percent capacity as opposed to 80 percent pre-COVID, he noted. It has been operating with 60 percent less office and administrative staff since mid-March, he added.

As Roach has pointed out during various interviews, Contempora Fabrics furloughed 150 people on March 20 and, four days later, had secured enough fabric business for masks and gowns for customers and started making masks for its employees. So it started to bring back a good amount of employees on March 24.

“As our PPE production continued to expand and grow rapidly, we continued to bring more (employees) back,” he said. “Our PPE business was very strong through June but now has tapered off some.”

Contempora instituted a number of safety measures, including adding hand-washing stations outside of all entrances, closing its canteen and creating an outdoor dining area. It also assigned teams for cleaning areas of the plant and in the office, and it requires daily temperature checks, social distancing and the wearing of masks.

Engineered Materials Technology, Inc.

Business at Engineered Materials Technology, Inc. (EMTECH), Sterling Heights, MI, has remained steady, thanks to government contracts and its move into PPE, said John Hall, Sales Representative.

“To say the least, (the pandemic) was scary,” he said. “We stopped production on our commercial items and kept on rolling with our defense production orders. If it was not defense related or deemed essential from our customer’s standpoint, we did not produce the order. We did, however, go into ‘normal’ production in June,” he continued, adding that production has since slowed down some, to about 80 percent capacity.

EMTECH, a Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business specializing in the design and cut-and-sew fabrication of non-metallic semi-rigid substrates, found itself with a lot of cotton fabric on hand when the crisis was beginning, so it decided to produce masks and donate them to local healthcare workers. They also produced some gowns.



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"With the amount of orders that were coming in, we were hiring and training people pretty frequently," Hall said. "During the pandemic, we added staff, not let staff go, which is crazy to think about."

He added: "Since they (PPE items) were so scarce and in such high demand, we produced face masks and isolation gowns as one of our lines. We were ahead on our other production runs, so we focused heavily on those two items."

As other companies, EMTECH checks all employees' and visitors' temperatures before they can enter the building, has them fill out questionnaires regarding COVID-19 and requires them to social distance, wear masks and sanitize frequently.

Hamrick Mills

When the crisis was beginning to take hold in late March, Gaffney, SC based Hamrick Mills was deemed Essential and began implementing a rotating office schedule consisting of teams to reduce the number of people in the office at any given time. It also created "in-office" guidelines to protect employees as best as possible from unnecessary exposure, according to Jim Hopkins, Director of Sales and Marketing.

Those guidelines included social distancing, limiting the number of people in offices or other specific areas, wearing face masks and taking temperatures upon entering the building, etc. Since mid-June, the company has returned to "mostly" to full office staffing, but those guidelines remain in effect, he said.

Because Hamrick Mills' was already involved in the manufacture of fabrics for scrubs, gowns, and other PPE type fabrics, the company had enough business to remain fully staffed, Hopkins said.

"We actually increased operations, to the extent that we could, to produce additional cloth for the PPE requirements," he said. "We operated one plant over what was normally the July 4th shutdown week in order to make additional cloth."

Because of the large and diverse types of its fabric offerings, the company was able to redirect a number of currently running products successfully into PPE products, where they were not normally intended, Hopkins said. In some cases, it had to modify or make minor adjustments to the constructions and/or yarns, but for the most part they were simply redirected, he added.

Currently, market conditions are "soft," but the looming release of the recent PPE gown solicitation could firm up the marketplace "very quickly" if any domestic manufacturers get a contract for gowns, he pointed out.

"Slowly, things are starting to 'loosen up' to some degree," Hopkins said. "But we do not see it ever returning to what might be termed as 'normal.' We are not sure what the 'new normal' will be, but are fairly certain that it will never be as it was."



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Hemingway Apparel

At the start of the pandemic, the business model at Hemingway Apparel was about 60 percent fashion underwear (tops, bottoms, slips, camisoles, sports style bras, leggings, etc.), 30 percent shirts and 10 percent accessories, said President Chris Marsh.

The first product group to be affected by the pandemic was the shirt business, which went to zero, he reported. Fashion remained fairly strong, with some style change and accessories remaining steady, he added. The company pivoted shirt production into face masks as part of the Hanesbrands/Parkdale initiative.

Day-to-day operations didn't change much for the Hemingway, SC based company with respect to employment and capacity, he said. Hemingway Apparel remained fully staffed and went into overtime shifts, with no one losing any work time, he noted. Calls from companies came from around the world and the shirt business started "rebooting" in July, Marsh said.

"Now our industry is faced with this: How do we effectively manage and produce the sheer volume of work being made available?" he said. "For many, including us, the regular customer base is coming back fairly strong, but they are 'in line' behind some PPE products that are finishing up. Many customers have all together lost their capacity because of some manufacturers switching a vast majority of their business to PPE permanently. Then there is the 'third wheel,' and that is large amounts of opportunity from companies that offshored who are trying desperately to onshore some of their products and secure capacity stateside."

With 20 percent up since the pandemic started, Hemingway currently needs to hire more employees due to work volumes, but it is having difficulty finding people because of federal government relief payments that disincentivize some from returning to work, he added.

"We did do some shifting between products as we ramped up the PPE," Marsh said. "We are now working through shifting again to meet the demand of our non-PPE customers."

The company has taken numerous steps recommended by the CDC to ensure the safety of its employees, he added.

Henderson Sewing Machine Co.

Henderson Sewing Machine Co. has had to furlough only two employees since the coronavirus crisis began – and only because they were exposed to individuals who were confirmed with COVID-19, according to President Frank Henderson.

Designated an Essential Business due to its support of military and PPE manufacturers, the Andalusia, AL based company has not altered its work schedule since the outbreak reached U.S. shores, he added. "We have been very fortunate!" Henderson said.

Its primary product change was its shift into automated face mask production systems and other PPE-manufactured products, including Ultrasonic Seam Seal and Hot Air Tape attaching equipment.



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"Many manufacturers of 'normal' textile sewn products are seeking automation to assist them in manufacturing textile sewn products in the USA," Henderson said. "The textile and sewn products industries have been changing for many years and continues to change. There are many new initiatives regarding manufacturing of PPE goods with Ultrasonic and Hot Air Tape Sealing equipment that has had only limited exposure in the USA."

Internally, primary changes employees have seen are many of the usual measures put into place in businesses around the world to help ensure their health, safety and well-being, i.e. social distancing, temperature checks, mask wearing, etc., he added.

InnovaKnits

Based at the Manufacturing Solutions Center in Conover, N.C., InnovaKnits saw all of its production work in medical, performance apparel and traditional apparel come to a halt, according to Managing Partner Jason Wilkins. Consulting and development projects, however, remained steady and in some cases ramped up, he added.

Plus, the incubator company did transition into knit masks and knit head straps for face shields, and produced protective vests and cut-resistant items for police forces, as well as performed work for the U.S. Navy, he noted.

"The masks received some traction with a few different brands that we manufacture for," Wilkins said.

Employee-wise, InnovaKnits furloughed one person on third shift but has since brought him back to work.

The company shifted some of the balance between product categories in order to build stock on "normal," non-PPE SKUs, to keep people working and to come out "ahead of the curve," he said.

"We are running at about 100 percent capacity now due to masks," Wilkins said. "Before COVID we were about 70 percent. If masks go away, we will be right back to about 70 percent."

Jason Mills

Jason Mills, Milltown, NJ, experienced severe supply chain disruptions as its U.S. based sources of manufacturing were limited due to "essential" production and/or staff cutbacks, said President Michael Lavroff. But, that situation has corrected itself in the last few weeks, he added.

The company is a complete sourcing, manufacturing, warehousing and distribution partner for all mesh, fabrics and industrial textile manufacturing needs.

Deemed an Essential Business, as all manufacturing facilities in New Jersey were, the company saw limits on output created by outside forces, he pointed out. Jason Mills did not reduce staff or shifts, but employees did work remotely. Production is back to nearly 100 percent, and the office has resumed semi-normal operations with staggered staff/shifts, Lavroff added.



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"We saw a surge in indoor recreation textiles and have adjusted to meet those demands," he said.

For employee safety, the company requires home temperature checks, self-surveys, the mask requirement when moving about the office, 100 percent flexibility in scheduling and allowing remote access, he said.

Vapor Apparel

Vapor Apparel, based near Charleston, SC, in the town of Hanahan, already was producing neck gaiters when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, but it ramped up production of the face covering to help meet the needs of the suddenly burgeoning market. In addition, the company pivoted into face mask production to offset the shortages in this area.

The company has been able to increase capacity, and has not had to furlough anyone due to business reasons, said President Jackson Burnett.

"Production ran solid all the way through because of our customer and product mix," he said. "Once retailers started to open back up, June was crazy. At the same time, we were dealing with COVID cases inside our facility and had half our production team stay home due to concern. Once the two- to three-week quarantine period ended, everyone came back and we have been at full speed since."

Early on, Vapor Apparel implemented all CDC recommendations around safety protocols, and front office staff is working flex schedules, Burnett said. "This is the 'new normal' that I do not see going away," he said.

Venus Group

Venus Group, based in Foothill Ranch, CA, moved quickly into U.S. based manufacturing at its ISO 001-certified cut-and-sew facility in Fort Lawn, SC facility, for rapid distribution of medical-grade, disposable face mask production.

The company is a longtime manufacturer of healthcare textiles, including bed linens, blankets, patient gowns, scrubs, lab coats, mattress pads, bibs and more, in addition to a number of other products such as naperies and towels. So shifting into PPE was not a stretch for the company, according to Jeyur Patel, a company manager.

"(Operations remained) more or less the same, though Americans are always concerned with the uncertainty, so we try to keep our associates motivated in various, small ways," he said.

One of the main changes experienced by the company are the CDC-recommended guidelines implemented to help prevent exposure, Patel said.



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Anonymous supplier

A fabric producer who wished to remain anonymous said that it formed a COVID-19 Steering Team in March to quickly develop and communicate changes in practices to protect employees, according to a company spokesperson.

Communications are issued every week or two about the company's response to the pandemic. Early on, the firm implemented practices to minimize an employee's potential exposure to the coronavirus, consistent with CDC and its state's health department, practices that remain in place today, she said.

The company has not had any disruption of production due to the pandemic but it did have to lay off some operators and reduce its second shift, she added.

"The urgency of a project we were working on for disinfecting wipes was increased significantly," she said. "We have sold fabric for mask production and have had new product trials to make fabric for masks and lab work for medical gowns."

Production is down by 30 percent compared to pre-coronavirus, she said.