SEAMS Member Spotlight: InnovaKnits, LLC

In our latest edition of SEAMS Member Spotlight, InnovaKnits, LLC is highlighted. Company Managing Partner Jason Wilkins answers our questions.

Company headquarters: Conover, N.C.

Year founded: 2015

Primary specialties: Design, development and manufacture of custom textiles with a primary focus in flatbed i.e. seamless / whole garment / 3D knitting

Brief history of company:

"InnovaKnits, LLC is a state-of-the-art contract manufacturing company specializing in flatbed knitting," Wilkins said. "We offer top-quality product development and production services to companies across the US. Though founded in 2015, we have over 40 years of knitting experience across a variety of industries! We specialize in making complex engineered products right off of our knitting machines, with little to no labor and little to no waste.

"In addition to our product development and production efforts, InnovaKnits also offers training / consulting services and tech support on the latest flatbed knitting equipment to colleges, universities, students and manufacturers across the USA as part of our ongoing effort to re-establish a domestic textile base," he added.

How being an incubator company at SEAMS' member Manufacturing Solutions Center has served InnovaKnits:

Watch video where Wilkins explains the importance of being part of that ecosystem and how the center served as a resource for getting off the ground and now continuing to thrive.

Markets served: "Aerospace, Apparel, Athletic, Automotive, Footwear, PPE, Medical, just to name a few. We are unique because we are not 'married' to any market. We are experts in the technology of flatbed knitting ... so if this technology is the RIGHT way to make a product or component, we do it!"

Company's challenges and opportunities:

Challenges:

- Because we are essentially developing a product that does not currently exist every time we want new business, time to market is a big challenge.
- Finding the "right" products to develop / invest time on that have a sufficient combination of margin and volume.
- Programming expertise is our most valuable resource, and the scarcity of this talent is a barrier to faster growth.

Opportunities:

- Capitalize on labor issues ... flatbed knitting is an inherently LESS labor-intensive way to make products in MANY cases. And the labor is EASIER and more rewarding.
- Capitalize on waste story ... flatbed knitting is an additive manufacturing process ... no waste inherent in the process vs. traditional cut and sew.
- Flatbed knitting is a very versatile discipline ... continue to focus on a diverse mix of products to optimize margins, volumes and redundancy.

Company differentiators:

- **External – Technical expertise / proficiency in product development**: "We have one of the best flatbed knit programmers in this hemisphere that allows us to create products that are not easily replicated / don't exist elsewhere."
- **External – Manufacturing knowledge**. "We have a great combination of both development and manufacturing know-how that sets us apart from our competitors that typically just offer one or the other."
- **External – versatility and willingness to contract**: "Our diversification and versatility to be in many market segments."
- **Internal – Flatbed knitting is a very "worker friendly" discipline / technology.** "Most of the work is done by machines / computers and there is diversity and challenge in the workload. It is not just 'screwing lids on the toothpaste' tubes as they go by."

Thoughts on the Made-in-America/Americas movement and strategy to remain competitive in the U.S. and this hemisphere:

"The Made-In-America movement aligns perfectly with our technology and strategy. If people want to move production locally, improve labor conditions / environment, reduce reliance on 'hard' labor and reduce waste, then flatbed knitting is the perfect fabric formation discipline to meet all these demands! So we feel we are well positioned if/when work wants to come back to this hemisphere."

Biggest challenges and opportunities for manufacturing in the USA as well as the Western hemisphere:

"Labor, like everyone else. Aside from that, it's the same old boogeyman of 'my customers can get it landed from China cheaper than I can buy the raw materials to make it.' And the supply chain being very fragmented does not help – but that of course is where SEAMS comes in to fill that gap and connect some dots!"

Business outlook for your company for the foreseeable future, as well as your future growth plans:

"Continue to grow slowly but surely with a portfolio of products that are repeatable and continuous and have good margins. We started at the end of 2015 with two machines and two people. We now have 20 machines and 10 people. As we work with our customers to develop and engineer new products, and those products succeed, we will continue to buy machines and grow accordingly."

Current business conditions, opinion on the health of the apparel/textile/sewn products industry markets served now and going forward and what will make the company successful in this environment:

"The entire textile industry certainly seems soft right now. We see it mostly in our yarn suppliers and their trials and tribulations. But we are small enough that these economic 'waves' are more like 'ripples.' And we have a diversified and unique enough product portfolio that a lot of our markets are somewhat isolated from these big peaks and valleys."

Value SEAMS membership brings to the company:

"It's all about connections. We are a business-to-business company that specializes in a technology that not a lot of people really understand. And truthfull, it is hard to wrap your head around in a two-minute elevator speech. So the more we can meet people and talk face to face, get them to our facility and get them to understand our value over time, that is the best. And SEAMS gives us many opportunities to do this."