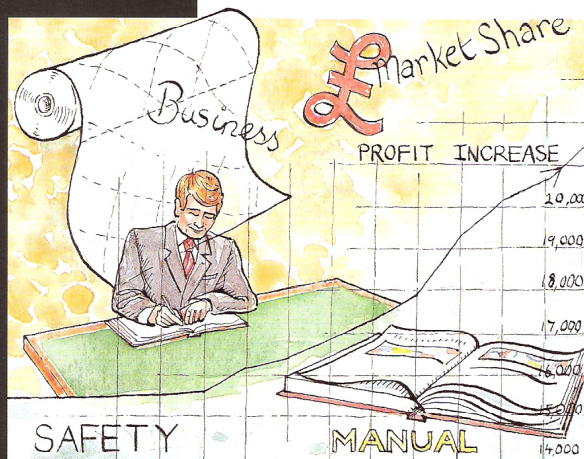


# LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

*Open Learning at Kimberly-Clark*

## A FLEXIBLE SOLUTION TO A COMMERCIAL PROBLEM



Kimberly-Clark Europe is a wholly-owned autonomous subsidiary of an American company which specialises in the production of disposable products such as paper towels for homes, schools, offices, hospitals and industry. The company employs 40,000 people worldwide, of whom 3,000 are based in the UK.

In 1987, Kimberly-Clark UK's Service and Industrial operation was faced with a major problem. In the previous

seven years, the company's share in the industrial hand towel market had declined from 40% to 20%.

Kimberly Clark's senior management decided that this trend could be reversed by introducing a new range of low-cost, quality products. These would be made from waste paper which would keep production costs low, while also enabling the company to deliver a quality product. Senior management decided that the company would need to open an integrated mill specifically for this market sector.

If Kimberly-Clark's objective of low running costs was to be achieved, the mill would need to integrate its selection, training, manning and payment systems. In short, it would need modern, flexible working arrangements.

A planning team was established to devise the operating system for the mill. The team looked at a variety of work and training methods, such as Just-in-Time operation, competence-based training and self-organising groups. They decided to combine the best elements from each of these systems.



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LEARNING METHODS CASE STUDY

The planning team drew up a series of objectives for the new mill. One of these was that the mill would operate on a Just-In-Time basis for greater efficiency. They also decided that each shift would have a pool of highly adaptable, self-organised teams of men and women. Everyone on a shift would be a team member, trained to operate all production machines. There would be no supervision or line management below mill manager. Nor would there be overtime arrangements – pay above a basic level and shift allowances would relate to each member's range of skills.

This approach was a radical departure from the traditional practice of an employee being trained in skills for a specific job which had clearly defined boundaries.

The planning team's objective was to produce a workforce that was adaptable, flexible, multi-skilled and able to use its initiative and take personal responsibility for achieving work targets. The team system would also mean that employees would be working for each other, providing help, training and support and sharing in their combined success.

However, such an approach presented a major challenge as each team member would need a wide range of practical, clerical and administrative skills. Kimberly-Clark would therefore need to mount a far-reaching training programme. This was approved by senior management and in mid-1988, two main training objectives were established:

- To train the workforce to achieve a consistent supply of quality products
- To train 90 people from diverse backgrounds to form self-organised, flexible, multi-skilled shift teams.

### **Delyn Mill**

The new mill was to be called Delyn and was based in Clwyd, North Wales. The mill would have 90 employees divided into five shift teams and would be run as a continuous seven day operation. The manufacturing process would involve feeding waste paper to a paper machine which would supply large rolls of towelling to three converters. These machines would make the finished product by a process of cutting, folding and packing.

Before the training programme began, Kimberly-Clark received help from the Employment Department which provided £70,000 for a jointly-funded training programme. The funding was partly used for developing Open Learning packages which would play an important part in the training programme. The company also engaged the services of an outside consultant who helped develop team training and gave advice on the overall programme.

### **The Training Programme in Action**

The training programme was extensive and covered many areas including safety, paper-making technology and manual writing. The latter enabled team members to write training and operating manuals during the machine installation period. This process provided a valuable form of self-learning and helped strengthen links between team members. It also resulted in the creation of clear and simple-to-read manuals!

The team members also helped to train each other.

### **The Credit System**

Staff at Delyn Mill were paid a basic salary and shift and disturbance allowances. There was also an opportunity to increase pay through a credit system which rewarded additional skills. This was a good way of motivating team members to improve and increase their range of skills.

An Open Learning resource offered around 100 learning packages to help employees acquire new skills. The packages covered a wide range of subjects, from paper-making to keyboard skills, hydraulics and pneumatics. Some consisted of booklets and cassettes, while others were kit parts. Team members were assessed by their peers or a log-book system. Kimberly-Clark also used external assessors from local colleges, who supervised courses accredited by the Engineering Industry Training Board (EITB) and the City and Guilds Institute.

### **Delyn Mill in Operation**

Delyn Mill became operational in January 1990, and achieved full production by March of that year. By the summer, the mill had a workforce of 90 people.

### **The Project Results**

The results from the Delyn Mill operation are impressive:

- The planning team's twin objectives of producing low-cost, quality products and establishing effective teams were achieved within the first 12 months. This enabled Kimberly-Clark to enter the market quickly with a new range of highly competitive products.
- Production also rose quickly. In January 1990, production output was 59 tonnes and the budgeted sales target for the second half of the year was 810 tonnes per month. This target was met by early May.
- Kimberly-Clark aimed to cut production costs by 52%. A 56% reduction was achieved by the end of April – just four months after Delyn Mill became operational. By December 1990, the production costs were 50% of the January 1990 figure.
- There was an 87% reduction in stock inventory which saved Kimberly-Clark hundreds of thousands of pounds in materials and storage costs.
- The teams consistently produced high quality goods. By the end of the first year the zero defect quality figure was 98.9% (no defects would produce a figure of 100%).
- Product quality was consistently meeting customer requirements. The rejection rate for finished products was negligible. This increased customer confidence in Kimberly-Clark products.
- Kimberly-Clark's market share has increased significantly since production began at Delyn.
- Large numbers of staff increased their range of skills and gained National Vocational Qualifications.
- The workers at Delyn Mill were given responsibility and the opportunity to use their initiative and deploy a wide range of skills. The resulting variety, responsibility and opportunity produced a well-motivated workforce and excellent results.

## L E A R N I N G   T E C H N O L O G I E S

The Delyn Mill project was so successful that Kimberly-Clark has opened another mill operating on the team principle. Staff at older, more traditional mills are currently negotiating working practices so that they can move over to the team system.

### **Conclusion**

By any standards, the results at Delyn Mill are outstanding. Productivity and product quality have been raised, while production costs have been significantly lowered. As a result, Kimberly-Clark has increased turnover, profits and market share. The project also produced a highly-skilled and highly-motivated workforce.

Kimberly-Clark identified a problem and opted for a flexible solution. The use of Open Learning systems contributed significantly to the successful results. In short, the project was made possible by a combination of factors. Firstly, the imagination of the planning team was an important catalyst. Secondly, the commitment of Kimberly-Clark itself to a comprehensive training programme using Open Learning packages was a vital element. Finally, there was the motivation of Delyn Mill staff who responded positively to the flexibility of the Open Learning programme and the new working practices. Kimberly-Clark's successful training programme is an example to other UK companies looking to improve staff motivation, market share and general business performance.