

OPEN LEARNING

Hydro Polymers Ltd

COMPANY REHABILITATION WITH OPEN AND FLEXIBLE LEARNING

THE BACKGROUND

Hydro Polymers Ltd is part of the Petrochemicals Division of Norsk Hydro AS - Norway's largest industrial company. Based in County Durham, the company has an annual turnover of over £100m and employs around 500 people. Primarily, the factory annually produces around 125,000 tonnes of PVC suspension resin and 60,000 of PVC compound in granulate or powder form.



HYDRO POLYMERS

After the present owners took over what was then a loss making organisation in 1982, it became clear that, if the company were to compete successfully with the best in Europe, radical changes in working practices were necessary, coupled with considerable investment. Most of the plant and technology were very dated and safety was sadly lacking - improvements needed full union co-operation.

The company realised that, to maximise the benefits of any investment, they needed 'a total culture change'. Consequently, the local management team drew up a strategic plan which included the type of investment required, a restructuring programme to support this investment, Statements of Intent relating to employees' conditions, training programmes and the replacement of bonus schemes with an upstanding wage.

The key to ultimate success was to be training.



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LEARNING METHODS CASE STUDY

THE TRAINING SOLUTION

In 1985, despite the losses being incurred, the company set off on the road to continuous improvement which was to include an extensive programme of training. The aim was to create as flexible a workforce as possible.

In the craft maintenance areas, the company split its engineering workforce into the two main categories of Mechanical and Instrument/Electrical. After conducting a training needs analysis, each craftsman undertook eight weeks of off-the-job training on courses at the local skill centre which was set up specifically to meet company needs.

The training of process operators was split into the two areas of awareness and hand skill training and new technology training. At this point, the company became involved in piloting the City and Guilds 060 Process Operators course.

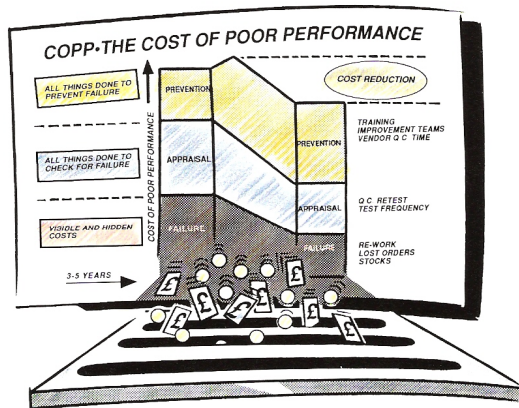
In addition to training operators, the company also realised the importance of a training programme for their first line managers.

They wanted a programme which would stretch the individual and ultimately create a 'thinking culture'. Supported by the Employment Department and County Durham Training and Enterprise Council, they developed their current package.

THE FORMAT

The City and Guilds 060 Process Operators course is in open learning format. All the studying is done in the employees' own time, at their own pace, and the only payment they receive is when they attend tutorials whilst at work (once a month). Every new starter is now expected to obtain the 060 Part 1 as a minimum requirement of the job.

The First Line Managers' (FLM) programme consists of five interlinking modules, with the emphasis on work-based competency. The culmination is the successful completion of an improvement project. Each module generates a number of focus points for action, allowing the first line manager (FLM) to concentrate on very specific areas which need improvement, thus helping the FLM to work more effectively.



THE BENEFITS

Introduces change effectively

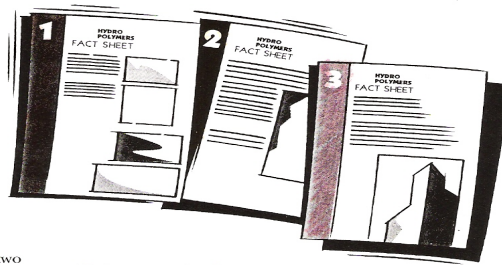
The pilot course for operators was successfully completed by all sixteen of the volunteers from the resin plants. As a result of that first year's success, 60 people have now gone on to complete Part 1. Since then, nine people have finished the two years of Part 2 and the two modules of Part 3 which led them to the NVQ Level 3. Four of the group have gone further, to embark upon an HNC in process engineering.

Breeds enthusiasm and loyalty

The success of the pilot group has created such an interest amongst other staff that three further groups are already in varying stages of completion.

Breaks down barriers and creates a thinking environment

The FLM programme allows structured interaction, with measurable results, between the FLM and the manager; it trains the FLM to adopt continual improvement as part of the normal thinking process; since it is work based, direct benefits are visible for all; group work results in a deeper understanding of cross-functional problems - and all these improvements may be monitored and measured, with all the focus points for action being fed into the company-wide Total Quality Project Registration system.



Raises standards

Improvement projects have been very wide ranging, from health and safety standards in a laboratory to speeding up colour matching prior to a production run. All the projects, including the TQM project, have saved the company £1,000,000 to date.

Raises status and self-esteem

The successful completion of the FLM programme results in the award of a BTEC certificate in Management Studies, carrying with it an NVQ Level 4.

Process Operators, as they achieve successive levels, can obtain NVQs which are also transferable.

In addition, the company can educate its workforce without having to lose them for weeks on end on training courses.

THE FUTURE

The company's aim is to have all of their process personnel registered and move through the training schemes leading to NVQs. They are also investigating the Accreditation of Prior Learning in relation to their long-serving operators.

Open learning training programmes are being extended into every area of the business, with people studying variously for MBA, computing, chemistry, polymer technology courses and a credit management course.

In short, Hydro Polymers Ltd see training and education as the 'key to good management planning'. Their personnel manager, John Pollock, concludes:

"People are our most valuable asset. We keep improving our technology. It would seem logical that we should do the same with our people."

DEVELOPMENTAL FLEXIBILITY

Open and flexible learning can be developed to suit the needs of a particular organisation or individual.

It can be made what you want it to be.