

OPEN LEARNING

Improved Training Facilities and their Consequences

HYDRO FERTILIZERS

The Background

Hydro Fertilizers Ltd is in a highly competitive market where downward pressure on prices highlights the need for corporate objectives to be met in terms of profitability, efficiency and a high profile in the market-place. Key objectives are:

- the achievement of a profitable and viable business;
- the ability to operate as a low cost supplier in a heavy chemical commodity market;
- the maintenance of a major position in the UK nitrogen fertilizer market;
- the development of the business by capitalising on human resources within the company.

The company realised that to be profitable and competitive in a rapidly changing market, employees have to be kept up to date with working methods and technology; and that *everyone* must strive to perform more effectively and efficiently than the competition. If people want to achieve and maintain their full potential, they have to continue to learn. Their

knowledge and skills are valuable assets, not only to the company, but also to themselves. Hydro Fertilizers sees training as a continual process, not just a single course attended after leaving school or changing job.



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LEARNING METHODS CASE STUDY



The Training Solution

The company set itself the goal not only of establishing and equipping a management training centre and engineering training workshop within a given timespan, but also of proving that this investment in training had produced positive results. With support from Humberside TEC and the Employment Department, targets were met and training was devised, undertaken and subsequently evaluated.

A management development programme was created, based on the use of open and flexible learning materials combined with participative workshop/rehearsal sessions. This method of training was chosen for a number of reasons:

- training can be tailored to the individual needs of managers;
- learners can work at their own pace, in a place and at a time to suit them;
- it is cost effective;
- it allows trainers to be used as mentors and facilitators;
- it is flexible with consistently high standards.

Materials chosen had to be of a high quality, both in terms of content and of presentation; compatible with existing practice; diverse, to suit different levels of understanding; and, where possible, available for trial or examination before purchase to allow for piloting and assessment.

The core of the management development training programme is the Individual Learning Programme which sets out the individual's commitment to an agreed learning schedule. Throughout, the trainer and manager work together to ensure that the competence to be developed is identified as precisely as possible, taking into account prior knowledge and progress made at each stage of the training programme. The intention is to treat each member separately, avoiding the blanket approach of traditional learning methods.

Craft skills training was chosen to comply with criteria similar to those applied to management training. Specific to engineering training were the need for compatibility with the existing multiskilling programme and the relevance of practical equipment and kits. Each programme also needed to be linked to nationally recognised qualifications. All these criteria could be fulfilled with open and flexible learning techniques. In addition, a unique approach to the transfer of engineering craft skills was adopted, whereby everyone in the teams involved was responsible for training their colleagues in their own specialist areas, thus using the existing skills of the mechanical, electrical and instrument craftspeople.

This reinforced the progression towards a multi-skilled engineering staff. Learning events were chosen to be as job related as possible, ranging from short secondments and projects to off-the-job workshops and courses.

To ensure that this universal training was successful, it was essential to obtain commitment from the most senior levels of the company. Only then could the process work determinedly towards its goal.

The Format

Open and flexible learning methods were employed wherever appropriate, and study was undertaken at home or in the open learning centre, whichever was most convenient. Each individual learning programme typically includes computer based training, interactive video, audio/video cassettes and workbook, attendance at a group workshop and the completion of pre- and post-learning questionnaires; but each one is tailored to the needs of individual employees. The methods employed could provide valuable student feedback for subsequent use in counselling or tutorial sessions and for the assessment of individual achievement, which could itself be linked to credits for formal qualifications.

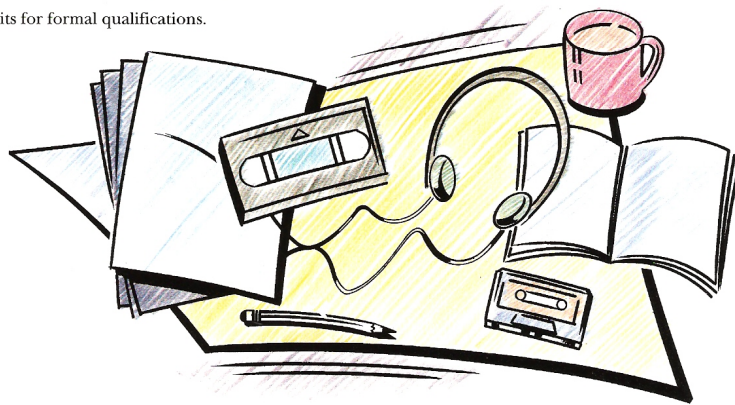
The Benefits

Improved facilities

- the project resulted in new and invaluable facilities for Hydro Fertilizers Ltd.

The company now boasts:

- an open learning centre, equipped with learning stations for interactive video and computer based training;
- a library of films, videos and packaged courses;
- a presentation training studio with back projection facilities and a video mixing/editing suite;
- an engineering training workshop, with tools and equipment for craft skill development, electronics and pneumatic learning kits;
- a training and conference centre with a suite of air-conditioned conference and syndicate rooms;
- a lectern controlling lighting and back projection of tape, slide and video options, and a lectern-mounted video recording facility using remote cameras;
- a training team of four professional trainers.



Reduced production costs

- down from £27m in 1989 to £25.2m in 1990.

Increase in saleable product per employee

- in 1990 exceeding the target by 115 tonnes per person.

Reduction in lost time due to accidents

- down to 10.2 per million working hours in 1990, from 19 per million in 1989. These outcomes have continued at similar rates of improvement in 1991; eg lost time accidents now down to 2.6 per million (Feb 1992).

Improved staff attitude

- identifiable objectives were set for all staff involved, resulting in the identification and eradication of existing problems, as well as a more positive approach by individuals.

The Future

The facilities have proved invaluable to Hydro Fertilizers and will be used to increasing effect in the future. The flexibility of their training approach allows facilities to be adapted to specific needs.