

LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

Open Learning in Action at Samco-Strong

INTERACTIVE TRAINING FOR A WORLDWIDE BUSINESS

The name Samco-Strong is synonymous with state-of-the-art hydraulic cutting presses used in a wide range of industries such as shoe making, automotive, packaging, toys and clothing. Computer-aided design, robot welding and CNC machining have kept Samco's presses at the forefront of an increasingly competitive market. The company now employs 60 people at its Leicester headquarters.



The Business Challenge

Samco's Managing Director Tim Watt identified weaknesses in the company's sales activities. Machinery revenues in previously successful markets had failed to grow over three successive years. The company needed to open up new geographical areas.

Samco turned to Open Learning to train new sales engineers in the UK and agents in new territories around the world. It also aimed to foster a new, pro-active approach to identifying leads and customer needs.

Untapped markets in the Middle and Far East and in South America were targeted for the sales drive. This meant that new agents – many of whom would not have English as their first language – would have to be brought up to speed, along with the expanded team based at the company's Leicester headquarters.



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LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES CASE STUDY

A Training Solution for a Complex Problem

Samco's management was reluctant to embark on a traditional training programme. In the past, this had involved the trainee working alongside an experienced engineer and visiting manufacturing units for face-to-face instruction.

Previous experience indicated that it could take between eighteen months and two years to train a sales engineer to reach the required level. That could mean three years before any real benefit was felt. The lead-time for special items was even longer.

A further complication was the need to ensure a consistent approach across a worldwide network, both in terms of message and training objectives.

The company's ambitious target was to fully train 20 sales staff around the world in only six months.

Samco investigated options which would achieve the desired results as quickly as possible and which would satisfy the needs of both overseas agents and UK engineers moving into international sales.

A review was carried out which drew on the expertise of both internal and external sources. Findings indicated conclusively that an open and flexible learning programme would most effectively achieve the company's goals.

Open Learning Meets the Challenge

Samco approached Leicestershire Training and Enterprise Council which provided joint-funding under the Employment Department's Business Growth Training programme. De Montfort University at Leicester's Centre for Educational Technology and Development was then called in and a consultant experienced in Samco's industry was appointed.



A New Approach

The consultant's task was to develop and enhance the company's existing training materials into a modular Open Learning package based around manuals. This had to incorporate a wide range of topics including:

- installing equipment
- operating equipment
- problem-solving
- promotional and sales techniques

The manuals incorporated regular activity modules. Computerised self-assessment tests enabled the trainee to measure his or her own progress. A demonstration video completed the package.

Samco implemented the Open Learning scheme at its Leicester headquarters and with sister companies and agents worldwide.

Twelve months later it was able to assess the effectiveness and the results of the programme.

Immediate Increase in Sales in New and Established Markets

The training programme generated immediate and visible additions to the company's bottom line.

Within twelve months the new sales force had secured $\frac{1}{2}$ million of new contracts. These included orders valued at $\pounds 300,000$ in previously unexplored Far Eastern markets.

Equally significant was the regeneration of sales in the company's traditional areas of operation – those stagnant markets that had first prompted the training initiative. Sales engineers operating in these areas were successful in securing $\pounds 100,000$ of new business.

Speedy and Effective Training with Minimum Disruption

Samco's Open Learning programme created a motivated and professional sales force quickly and with minimum disruption; most trainees were able to work through the materials in only 100 hours. The cost of the project was thus substantially lower than that of traditional training methods.

Trainee-Centred Learning

Open Learning is an interactive training tool. Samco found that the use of graphics in the manual, supplemented by computer software and video materials, led to increased information retention – both amongst English speakers and amongst overseas trainees for whom language might have proved a barrier.

The computer-based self-assessment modules and video element also meant that senior staff were not obliged to oversee the training and were able to continue with their daily routine.

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

Most important, however, was the commitment and motivation of trainees both at the Leicester headquarters and at remote sites all over the world. The Open Learning approach led to a sense of ownership of the learning process and of the knowledge gained.

The Next Step

Samco's excursion into Open Learning has proved a successful one. The immediate pay-off in terms of increased sales, coupled with the speedy and cost-effective achievement of ambitious training targets, means that the company is well-placed to continue its growth.

Inspired by the success of this first programme, Managing Director Tim Watt is now planning further Open Learning initiatives.