



innovative workplaces
Developing Organisations for the Future

Case Study – Thorpe Kilworth

A challenging market place and changing needs of clients required this medium sized East Midlands furniture manufacturer to become more versatile and flexible in its working practices. Thorpe Kilworth joined the Acas-managed Innovative Workplace project and as a result introduced elements of lean manufacturing, reorganised the stores area and introduced better stock control. The outcome was improved cross functional working and increased employee engagement.

Case study organisational background

Thorpe Kilworth was a designer, manufacturer and installer of high quality furniture for education, laboratory and health care establishments with 116 employees at its site in Corby, Northamptonshire.

It was one of ten organisations that participated, during 2009/10, in a project managed by Acas, known as 'Innovative Workplaces – Developing Organisations for the Future'. The project was funded by the East Midlands Development Agency (*emda*).

Throughout the duration of the project, the company experienced difficulties which resulted in short time working and redundancies. This was largely due to the seasonal nature of its work and the unexpected loss of work from major clients despite existing agreements. As a result, the headcount reduced to 80 employees during the project. A combination of cash flow problems and delays in clients confirming contracts culminated in the company going into administration in June 2010. Nevertheless, the organisation perceived benefits emanating from being involved with the Innovative Workplaces Project which are reported here. Since June 2010 twenty seven former employees have formed a co-operative company known as Thorpe Learning.

The issues

The company had identified that it needed to be more responsive to changes in the market place and to the needs of its clients. It was seeking to increase workforce versatility and flexibility so that individuals could be moved from one process to another in order to meet



fluctuations in demand. This required employees to develop their skills and to be more adaptable in client facing situations, as well as in project management, design, manufacture and installation. In addition, the company was aware that it needed to improve its competitiveness by maintaining quality and reducing waste and inefficiencies

The opportunity to participate in an Acas supported initiative was seen as an opportunity to improve the company's competitive edge by maintaining quality and improving manufacturing efficiency with the key objective of having all materials and consumables ready and clearly identified for manufacture. This particularly involved:

- Obtaining relevant information for production in a timely fashion
- Reducing double handling and other efficiency losses
- More consistency in design for manufacture
- Ensuring the delivery of all relevant materials to meet production schedules on as near to a 'just in time' basis as possible
- Implementing relevant revised procedures with relevant training
- Measuring before & after for cost-benefit analysis

A key element of the of Thorpe Kilworth's action plan was to improve employee engagement in a workforce viewed as loyal and responsive but with concerns about changing long established ways of working. Improving two way communications was seen as essential so that the workforce understood and was committed to the changes in the business.

How Acas helped – 'The Innovative Workplaces Project'

This innovative project was designed to stimulate organisational change, be workplace focused, provide customised organisational support, and develop management and leadership skills through a practical rather than a theoretical approach. It offered in-depth support to a number of organisations in the East Midlands region that were seeking to change workplace practices and increase employee engagement as a means of improving organisational performance.

Over an initial twelve month period during 2009 - 2010, the Innovative Workplace Project (IWP) provided a number of interventions to ten participating organisations. The IWP began in April 2009 with the recruitment and selection of organisations seeking to participate in the IWP. The organisations' nominated representatives participated in three core elements of the initiative commencing with an initial three and half day course to develop management and leadership skills, to build trust and dialogue between nominated representatives and to establish the group relationships necessary for action learning. The programme provided nominated representatives with the optional opportunity to gain a recognised management and leadership qualification.



This initial intervention was followed by monthly participant network meetings, which included action learning sets. Both the short course and the network meetings were facilitated via Acas' delivery partner UKWON. The third core element of the IWP was customised workplace facilitation provided by Acas Senior Advisers. Additional support was provided where there was an identified need, for example through Acas short training courses. Each organisation drew up an action plan and these were presented at a launch event in September 2009. These plans informed the projects within each organisation.

Thorpe Kilworth

In addition to the nominated representatives attending the IWP's three and half day programme and attending the network meetings, the Acas adviser facilitated a joint management and employee workshop on joint working/joint problem solving. Many of the techniques and ways of working that were practiced during the workshop were used in the latter stages of the project.

To assist constructive staff consultation the Acas adviser delivered a training session to the employee representatives on the Staff Consultation Forum. This reconstituted consultation forum was subsequently able to highlight issues such as the lack of standard procedures and poor team-working. Assistance on the formulation and structure of an employee engagement survey together with advice on good practice in relation to appropriate consultation and communication surrounding the preparation and delivery of the survey was provided to the organisation's representatives. Preparations were also made for the delivery of a session on the subject of 'effective meetings' as this had been identified as an essential development need.

Beyond the core elements of the Innovative Workplaces Project, but as part of the overall initiative, Acas provided some additional training events which were open to all members of IWP's participating organisations. One or both of Thorpe Kilworth organisation representatives attended the following training events, 'Meetings, Consultation and Forums', 'Having Difficult Conversations', and 'Facilitation Skills'. In addition three employees, other than the organisation's representatives, attended 'Having Difficult Conversations', whilst a further two attended the 'Facilitation Skills' training event.

The outcomes and impact

By the end of the project in 2010, before the company went into administration, a number of outcomes had been achieved and some elements of lean manufacturing had been introduced.

The stores area had been re-organised resulting in improved stock control and better facilities which were more secure. Throughout this re-organisation, a cross-functional working party had been operating enabling the company to demonstrate that employee participation could work well as illustrated by the following observation:

"The guys on the benches were working more as a team, helping one another and taking the trouble to go to the stores once we had reorganised it as opposed to 'Oh I can't be bothered to go over there because I'll never find it anyway'...it was a benefit"



Six team leaders from staff in manufacturing and the office had been afforded training and development opportunities as had the existing six employee representatives.

Manufacturing was reorganised formally into teams with regular team meetings being held. Following a training session from Acas, the Staff Consultation Forum was revised which led to improved communication between management and employees. As a consequence, a number of issues and inefficiencies were in the process of being addressed and an Employee Engagement Survey was planned, when the news came that the business was to close.

As mentioned earlier, former employees of Thorpe Kilworth have formed a co-operative company, Thorpe Learning, where some of the benefits of this project can continue.

**For further details please contact Acas Research and Evaluation at
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