

Games are being used to implement efficiency programmes and train manufacturing employees, Freddie Dawson discovers



Snakes and ladders

Manufacturers are constantly looking for ways to improve efficiency. But those in the food and drink sector still lag behind others, such as automotive and chemical manufacturers, says John Saysell, business development manager at training consultancy, MCP.

As they attempt to catch up, uncertainty about the best way to implement efficiency programmes is common, he says. This is because it often involves an entirely new way of thinking; a new set of skills for employees and close cooperation between different departments that may be unused to working closely together.

Defining skill sets

Streamlining maintenance techniques to minimise downtime and eliminate the need to check in with managers for tasks that can be accomplished on workers' initiative is one way to improve efficiency, says Saysell. This can lead to restructuring, as managerial layers are eliminated or people redirected to other tasks, and many companies want a model showing what the new structure will look like and what skills will be needed before they start, he adds.

MCP works with the National Skills Academy for Food and Drink Manufacturing

(NSA). It has designed a new skill set that links closely with the NSA's National Vocational Qualification model – competency-based qualifications that can be customised to fit individual situations – to address this need.

After consulting with 20 to 30 manufacturers on employee training for improving efficiency, MCP developed a model for engineering and maintenance, which is being piloted with a pharmaceutical manufacturer, says Saysell.

“I can only see the competitive nature of the industry increasing”

The model breaks down workers and problems into levels, with the requisite skills necessary for each increasing as the levels go up. Thus, for example, a production worker would be at Level one. If a problem occurs, he would have 10 minutes to fix it before passing it onto his manager at Level two. The manager would also have 10 minutes to try with his greater breadth of knowledge and

skills and so on up the line until the problem is solved, explains Saysell. Although this involves training operators in maintenance skills, it frees up engineers to concentrate on major problems, he says.

Company cooperation

But fostering cooperation between engineering and production is only one way to greater efficiency. Other manufacturers – such as Premier Foods, National Starch and, recently, Bakkavör – have implemented company-wide efficiency improvement programmes through getting employees to play a board game.

Training consultancy, Reliable Manufacturing (RM), has been using the Manufacturing Game – a board game similar to Monopoly – to train manufacturing employees in implementing efficiency improvement ideas across the board (pun intended).

The game consists of teams formed of three elements: production, engineering and business, each comprised of two or more people drawn from across the company taking a role not normally associated with their position. Thus a sales manager may form part of the production team, says RM md, Andrew Fraser.

The game takes up one-and-a-half days of a two-day workshop and is based on a standard

NEW QUALIFICATION FOR THE FISH AND SHELLFISH INDUSTRY

A new qualification from Improve, the food and drink sector skills council, will change training in the seafood industry.

The new Proficiency in Fish and Shellfish Industry Skills qualification is applicable to a wide range of processes involving fish or shellfish. It is for any company involved in fish and shellfish processing, packing or wrapping, distribution, sales or fish frying.

It is customisable and modules can be chosen based on what skills the firm wants employees to learn or improve, says Mica MacInnes, seafood skills consultant at the National Skills Academy for Food and Drink.

The qualification covers both hands-on training and more theoretical knowledge about a wide range of activities involving fish and shellfish; covering everything from practical training for effective processing, the science and technology of processing, and different preparation methods, through to storage, presentation and sales, she says.

"It's the whole range, from primary processing right through to things such as how to properly display fish at a fishmonger's," MacInnes explains.

The qualification is largely broken down into modules for manual and automatic processing of fish and shellfish. It is available at three levels: award, certificate or diploma, depending on what the company hopes to accomplish and how many credits are achieved, says MacInnes.



The right way to display fish will be covered

It is the first qualification for fish and shellfish processing to be launched for more than 20 years.

Previously, firms had to make do with General National Vocational Qualifications for food processing that had fish or shellfish modules included, which were much more limited in scope, says MacInnes.

Improve developed the qualification in conjunction with seafood employers in the UK, such as Young's Seafood, Pinneys

of Scotland and Burgons of Eyemouth. It was also developed with aid from the Seafood Training Academy in Grimsby, which is helping to make the qualification available through other providers in the Academy's seafood network, as well as trade organisations such as the National Federation of Fish Friers and the National Federation of Fishmongering.

To register interest, contact the National Skills Academy for Food and Drink.

case study that can apply to manufacturers across a variety of sectors. However, before the simulation takes place, RM spends time in each company assessing where efficiency problems lie and tailoring the game to address those needs, Fraser explains.

The remaining half-day is used to discuss what employees learned and how they can apply that knowledge back at work, he says. He adds that RM meets with employees over the following months to measure progress.

RM sometimes noticed a lag between developing and implementing ideas for improved efficiency, says Fraser. One of the benefits of the Manufacturing Game is that it forms cross-department and managerial-level groups capable of quickly creating and implementing improvement ideas, he says.

The Manufacturing Game's cross-departmental approach also means that the game can lead to a greater understanding of roles. This can, in turn, lessen the drive to pass blame, he remarks. Harkening back to the sales manager playing a production role, the game can demonstrate the consequences of guaranteeing without checking that production capability can deliver on those guarantees. Thus a product not living up to client expectations may not be the production manager's fault, he explains.

The game also eliminates the need for group presentations of ideas on how to improve the company – something often found in improvement schemes. But not everyone will choose to slim down their business through a board game. For manufacturers looking to implement a more traditional continuous improvement scheme, employee 'soft skills' can often be a potential tripping point, says Amanda Stott, md of Facilitate this!, a training consultancy company.

Continuous improvement

Unsurprisingly, Facilitate this! helps to facilitate continuous improvement programmes through coaching employees in soft skills such as public speaking, presenting and people management, as it recently did with manufacturer, McCain.

Many efficiency improvement directors will have started on the factory floor, become team leaders and then been put in charge of directing the improvement programme, says Stott. She adds that they are often used to simply coming into work, putting their head down and getting on with the task at hand. Suddenly, they are being asked to present ideas and solicit ideas from others, tasks that they may not have the skills to perform as efficiently as possible.

"There was already a relationship between an employee and the guy next to him packing boxes," Stott says. "Now one is inviting the other to share ideas on what the issues on the line are. Often the reaction is: 'Why should I share that?' or 'Why are you asking now?'"

Further problems may arise in dealing with willing contributors. For an efficiency scheme to be effective, the leader has to be able to gather contributions from the entire group and not just let one person dominate the conversation, Stott says. It is equally important to address people's fears and concerns without putting them down – especially if their idea is not implemented, she adds.

This can leave a firm's vaunted efficiency improvement drive dead in the water, due to – and with some irony – a lack of efficiency in people management at the lowest level. But, no matter how it is achieved, it is becoming increasingly clear that food manufacturers need to adopt continuous improvement schemes and then implement them correctly.

"I can only see the competitive nature of the industry increasing. The process of change needs to be accelerated and inertia needs to be overcome if companies want to survive," Fraser says. Training employees to have the skills necessary for improving efficiency will help to ensure that survival.

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