



**innovative workplaces**  
Developing Organisations for the Future

## Case Study – Liquid Control

Liquid Control Ltd is a private company, a builder and supplier of standard and custom built machines for processing (metering, mixing and dispensing) single and multi-component liquids/pastes based in Northamptonshire with a workforce of 20 employees. The company was looking for ways to improve the way the business was managed to help improve productivity and efficiency. Liquid Control joined the Acas managed Innovative Workplaces project and as a result introduced initiatives to identify and reduce skills gaps and improve flexible working practices. The outcome was improvements in communication and employee engagement.

### Case Study Organisational Background

Liquid Control Ltd (LCL) is a private company (with an owner living in Dubai and removed from the day-to-day running of the company) and is one of a group of companies known as the KK Group. It designs, builds and supplies standard and custom built machines for processing (metering, mixing and dispensing) single and multi-component liquids/pastes which are used in a wide range of manufacturing processes. The company is also a distributor of a number of products which can be used in the systems it provides or as “stand alone” dispensing products. The main applications covered are: – Structural Bonding, Sealing, Vacuum Encapsulating, Potting, Moulding, Casting, Resin Infusion, Resin Injection, Laminating, Filling and Packaging. The organisation’s employees are based in Wellingborough with the exception of one service engineer working from home in Scotland.

Liquid control 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*).

### The issues

At the time of applying to join the project, the company was seeking ISO 9001 certification and looking for opportunities to improve the way the business was managed. After years of stagnation in its management and working methods, its management had identified that to achieve the productivity and efficiency gains needed to sustain the business, it was vital to



ensure that the workforce was supportive and engaged with changes in working practices and played an active role in developing the business for the future. The company had an ageing workforce, many of whom had long service and there was a perceived resistance to change which had been exacerbated by the company being sold three times in the last five years.

Historically, decisions had been made by just a few individuals in the business without the involvement of the workforce. It was recognised that to grow the business, the workforce needed to be involved in decisions about 'what, when and how' things were done and it was known from experience that change was not always readily accepted, even if it was recognised as being for the benefit of all concerned.

The opportunity to participate in an Acas supported initiative was seen as a possible catalyst to addressing these issues; it would be an opportunity to help identify training and development needs and to institute the appropriate interventions to help meet these needs; to assist the movement towards achieving ISO 9001; and to help improve two way communication and employee engagement.

### **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.



## Liquid Control

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 number of activities in the workplace. In this case study organisation the Acas Adviser, through detailed face-to-face discussions, assisted the organisation's nominated representatives to clarify two main approaches to help meet the organisation's action plan requirements. One approach would be a staff survey covering general employee engagement issues, which would have a particular focus on employees' views around training and development. The other approach was the development and implementation of a skills matrix, to break the shop floor jobs into their key skills and identify employees' areas of expertise. The combined effect of the two strands was to identify any possible skills gaps and also capture information about employees' willingness to develop new skills. Additional benefits would be to make succession planning easier by identifying key individuals whose loss would be damaging and to get a broad range of data on employee engagement and how this might be improved.

The Acas Adviser provided the representatives of the organisation with guidance and a pro-forma on the requirements of a skills matrix and shared sample employee engagement questions for discussion. The employee engagement questions were agreed and the Acas Adviser produced an engagement survey questionnaire which was distributed to all employees. The completed survey forms were returned to the Acas Adviser who then produced a report summarising the findings.

The Acas Adviser followed the outcome of the survey by facilitating a focus group comprising a number of employees from the various departments. The group discussed the key areas emanating from the survey and the Acas Adviser then produced a report summarising the outcomes of the focus group discussions. This enabled the organisation's representatives together with the MD and an elected employee representative to draw up an action plan to address concerns which had been raised through the engagement survey process.

The second strand of the project, the completion of a skills matrix, was also facilitated by the Acas Adviser who spent some time on the shop floor talking to the project manager, fitters, technicians and storekeeper identifying the different aspects of the jobs and the skills required. The Adviser then compiled these into a matrix for all the shop floor jobs (except for the senior test engineer who was not on site) and sent it to the organisation's representatives. The Acas Adviser made suggestions as to how the organisation's representatives might approach assessing employees' skill levels against the matrix.

The completion of these two interventions equipped the organisation's representatives to be able to produce a more focused action plan, to maximise employee engagement and to quantify their issues around multi-skilling and to identify training, development and succession planning needs.

Beyond the core elements of the IWP, but as part of the overall initiative, Acas provided some additional training events which were open to all members of IWP's participating organisations. The Liquid Control organisation representatives attended the following Acas



training events, 'Having Difficult Conversations', 'Facilitation Skills Training' and 'Developing Mediation Skills'.

### **The outcomes and impact**

By the conclusion of the project there had been a number of outcomes related directly to the initial action plan, namely a skills analysis of employees to identify training needs. As a direct result, six months after the completion of the project, approximately 50% of the staff had completed NVQ level 3 courses, ranging from computer/electronics skills, to customer service and management skills. This has improved workforce flexibility.

The employee engagement survey and subsequent focus groups meeting identified issues around communications and training and development which were being addressed. For example, the organisation had introduced development appraisals for everyone in the workforce together with quarterly company meetings to keep everyone informed. This has provided employees with the opportunity to put forward ideas about their jobs and that input from the workforce was now proactively sought in machine design and development as highlighted by the following observation:

"We're encouraging the guys on the shop floor to come forward and have their input into how machines are designed and built in the first place – they know how things go together"

The organisation also identified the following activities as emanating directly from participation in the Acas managed project:

- Various areas have been identified such as Departmental Structure, Product and Facilities, for working parties of employees to meet and produce recommendations for improvement within these fields.
- One employee had received Institute of Occupational Safety and Health training to become a competent Health and Safety Officer.
- A member of staff from each department had become a Fire Warden/Officer.
- Organised quarterly presentations by external personnel are taking place across the company to improve health awareness.
- Weekly departmental meetings have been introduced to de-brief on the previous week and discuss work-loads for the forthcoming week.
- The process of achieving ISO 9001 status is progressing.

A number of these activities were seen to be work-in-progress as were improvements in communications between departments as evidenced by the following comment:

"I think the way we operate and communicate has probably got better. We work closer together rather than being segmented...I don't think communication is great but we do work better across departments now"

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