

# Cereal Probe Case Study



## Saxon Agriculture

Saxon Agriculture is based in Norfolk and is primarily involved in the export, import and trading of grain while also maintaining a wholesale seeds business. Guy Tasker along with 3 other members of his team undertook PROBE benchmarking workshops in October & November 2005.

### Why PROBE?

The PROBE process provides an opportunity to assess the company's performance and practice objectively away from routine daily operations. The identified strengths and weaknesses can then be acted upon decisively to drive business improvement.

**"We undertook Cereals PROBE to help us understand our strengths and weaknesses as a business. We were keen to reinforce areas where the company was performing well, ensuring that we did not lose sight of our competitive**

**advantage. We were also looking to improve in other areas where the benchmarking exercise showed us to be performing at a level that was less than we expected of ourselves."**

- Guy Tasker, MD



Guy Tasker, MD

### How it worked for Saxon Agriculture

The PROBE team that Guy brought together represented the full scope of Saxon Agriculture's activities. The team were briefed and given the opportunity to examine the questionnaire before they came together for the main session with the external Cereals PROBE facilitator. This is probably the single strongest element of the tool - the opportunity to get a diverse group of people together; managers and representatives from all areas of the organisation, to debate a series of questions. PROBE challenges the way things are done, particularly in areas such as communication, leadership, people management, and customer feedback.

Once the team has achieved a consensus view about how they rate their service's current practices and performance, the PROBE facilitator immediately analyses the team's data and feeds back a profile of how Saxon measures up to an holistic model of organisational excellence.

**"We scored highly in the areas of quality leadership, quality mindset and what happens when things go wrong. We believe it is important to take on responsible people and give them responsibility so that they can carry out their jobs free in the knowledge that they have the discretion to carry out key**

**tasks without having to constantly refer to management.**

**The fact that we are predominantly located in a single office allows Saxon to develop a strong team bond. It is a working climate where the management has a close relationship with employees and can be very hands-on in making sure that the quality mindset of the company is foremost in everybody's mind."**

The team also learns how their practices and performance compare with those of the large numbers of other organisations who have completed the PROBE assessment

process. The feedback is also broken down into various areas; the leadership, the processes, the people and the results.

**"In the rare instances at Saxon where problems do occur, this environment helps in making sure that people know that they have the support of senior management in overcoming these problems. Staff are able to see these instances as a chance to refine and improve business processes rather than blaming individuals. In this way, repeat occurrences are kept to a minimum by tight adherence and refinement of processes within the business."**

### Action Planning – Turning benchmarking theory into real improvements

Three weeks after the Cereals PROBE benchmarking facilitation day, Saxon called the Cereals PROBE facilitator back to their offices for an Action Planning session, where the strengths and weaknesses identified in the benchmarking workshop are worked into actions, responsibilities and deadlines.

**"A key action resulting from the Cereals PROBE follow up session was the launch of a customer**

**and supplier survey to find out what our key business partners thought of our current service but also what improvements they could recommend to us. Best practice as identified in Cereals PROBE benchmarking was utilising the resource that is your customer and supplier base to help mould your service delivery and associated standards.**

**We received over 700 responses to this survey and have been diligent in utilising this feedback to give a better service to**

**customers and suppliers. Their input suggested that they wanted more information, though not just price based information. This service is now tailored in the form of regular updates and provides customers and suppliers with an improved service from Saxon."**

- Guy Tasker concludes

**"We want people to return to our business, knowing that our service will regularly exceed their expectations. We always**

**recognise that there is choice for customers and suppliers in the market place and never take this for granted. Cereals PROBE benchmarking is a tool that helps us ensure due focus is maintained on issues such as service standards, supplier relations and customer satisfaction."**

## What is PROBE?

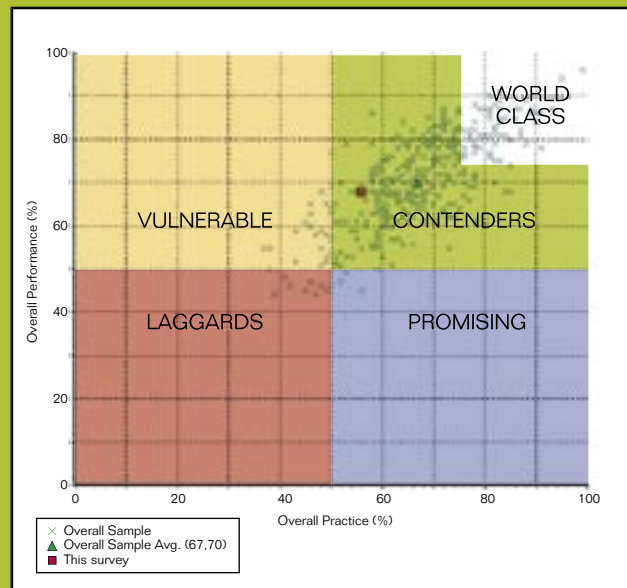
Cereals PROBE methodology has its roots in research on world-class manufacturing and service quality, led by IBM Consulting Ltd (UK) and London Business School. The PROBE database contains over 6000 individual site benchmarks from 32 countries across a wide range of sectors.

Cereals PROBE is based on a generic model of 'best practice', which is presented to the team in the form of a questionnaire. Comparison against the generic model and those companies on our database are shown in practice and performance terms. An example of the practice performance competitive positioning chart is shown here. All data is kept strictly confidential and the graph represents an anonymous example.

Strengths and opportunities for improvement are identified across a spectrum of the organisation's activities. Every aspect of the business is covered:

- from understanding the needs of service users, to measuring their satisfaction
- from service design to the operational processes of day-to-day service delivery
- from leadership styles and strategy development to people development and the measurement of staff satisfaction
- Material Processing in the Cereals Industry
- New Product Development in the Cereals Industry.

Test. UK. 14/03/2006  
Overall Practice vs Overall Performance: (56,68)  
(relative to overall sample)



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