

PROBE and the Cereals Industry Forum

The Cereals Industry Forum is a good example of the many 'change agencies' worldwide that use PROBE best practice benchmarking tools, through licensing or project arrangements, to help a particular community of businesses to develop and to improve their performance. For the CIF, the 'community' in question consists of businesses in the UK's cereals sector – the 'grain chain'. Chris Barnes, CIF Manager, tells the story of the Cereals Industry Forum's use of PROBE.

The Cereals Industry Forum was conceived in 2004 by the UK's Home Grown Cereals Authority (HGCA) and the Food Chain Centre with the mission of improving the efficiency and performance of the cereal chain in a way consistent with a sustainable, internationally competitive UK cereal industry. The Forum's adoption and deployment of PROBE best practice benchmarking tools has made a significant contribution to its ability to fulfil that mission, and has also delivered substantial benefits to the individual businesses that have participated in PROBE.

To support the Forum in pursuing its mission, Defra (The UK Government's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) provided £2.5 million of funding for projects to improve supply chain efficiency from seed to retail shelf. The Forum built on the experience of the preceding Red Meat Industry Forum and chose PROBE, facilitated by Comparison International Limited, to form part of a suite of business improvement tools along with Value Chain Analysis and Masterclasses.

The grain chain contains businesses of varying size from multinationals to SMEs and family businesses. The adaptability of PROBE to allow comparisons between the diverse businesses in the grain chain was a major reason why PROBE was chosen in preference to other benchmarking tools. Additionally, PROBE is not too time-consuming for participating businesses and is relatively inexpensive, allowing the Forum to achieve good industry penetration.



During the initial project, 48 companies completed the PROBE benchmarking process. It was a funding requirement that a good geographic spread was achieved across England and Scotland as well as gaining involvement from all links in the chain, namely seed breeders, merchants, cooperatives, millers, maltsters, animal feed compounders and food and drink manufacturers. These aims were achieved.

We had been looking at ourselves over the last five years and had made some improvements, but it was with a small group of people trying to push those through all of the time. PROBE was a great opportunity to start looking at the wider picture and to get the views of all the staff and get them involved.

***Amanda Lay, HR & Facilities Manager,
KWS UK, Cambridge***

It was realised early that a proactive approach was needed to recruit companies to participate in PROBE.

The grain industry can be considered as being "mature", with many long-established players operating with traditional practices in a low margin environment. Inertia and confidentiality are very real industry issues, and as a result volunteers were difficult to find in the early stages.

Initially HGCA stakeholders and levy payers such as merchants, cooperatives, millers and maltsters were targeted. On-site one-to-one meetings were arranged with Managing Directors to obtain engagement with the aid of a laptop PROBE presentation highlighting the methodology and potential benefits. Telephone cold-calling was employed to recruit businesses less well known to HGCA, such as food manufacturers. Despite a response rate of only 3% to this cold-calling campaign, once an on-site PROBE meeting had been arranged, engagement was usually forthcoming.

There has been a lot of positive feedback, and not a single complaint from companies who have participated in PROBE. Comparison International facilitators have undertaken the work very professionally and participants, many of whom were cynical at first, have agreed that the PROBE experience has been stimulating, illuminating, business beneficial and surprisingly enjoyable. An unexpected spin-off of participation has been the value of PROBE as a staff team-building vehicle.

We have found that PROBE is highly compatible with other business improvement tools employed such as Value Chain Analysis (VCA) and Masterclass. VCA, which studies the whole grain chain, can identify candidates for PROBE and, in turn, PROBE, which addresses a broad range of issues within an individual company, can point to areas that can benefit from a detailed Masterclass such as production lines, grain intakes and despatch areas.

Detailed case studies have been written for a number of the PROBE benchmarks. It is noteworthy that companies found a diversity of benefits from the PROBE experience:

Previously we have been relatively poor on induction training and at maintaining a training programme for employees that met the future needs of the company. PROBE identified these issues and was instrumental in their solution **Bob King, Crisp Malting Group**

A key action resulting from the Cereals PROBE was the launch of a customer and supplier survey to find out what our business partners thought of our current service and what improvements could be made **Guy Tasker, Managing Director of Saxon Agriculture Ltd**

As a result of best practice manufacturing introduced to us by Cereals PROBE we have reviewed our approach to Overall Equipment Effectiveness and its application to our batch production system with the aim of identifying problem areas to be addressed in order to improve efficiency **David Wilkes, Managing Director of Greencore Malt**

We were pleased that Cereals PROBE recognised that the practices we employ on new product development as being world class, as that part of our business operations is critical to our success and likely to be critical to the success of the cereals industry overall in the future **Kirsty Hall, Relationship Manager, KWS UK Ltd**

The PROBE workshops and action planning sessions turned out to be very constructive exercises and the initial reservations about the process did not materialise among the staff. Participants actually enjoyed it! **Duncan Monroe MD of Carrs Flour Mills Ltd**

During 2007, Comparison International helped the HGCA to analyse the data submitted by the first 48 PROBE participants. The analysis has provided invaluable insights into patterns of strengths and development need which have fed into HGCA's strategic development plans for the grain chain.

The Home Grown Cereals Authority's engagement with PROBE continues, and is broadening to include pioneering use of the newest PROBE tool – **PROBE for Sustainable Business**.

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Change Agency	
Industry Forum	Regional Development Agency
Not for profit organisation	NGO
Sector Body/ Trade Association	Consultancy
Modernisation Unit	Improvement Network
Business Support Agency	Chamber of Commerce

All over the world, in 1001 different settings, energetic, capable and often inspirational 'change agencies' encourage and help the corporate communities they serve to seek out and implement best practices and improve performance.

We at Comparison International know this, because we've met, worked with and learned from lots of them.

Change agencies come in many different guises, with the common thread that their aim is to stimulate and facilitate performance improvement among a particular group (or "community") of organisations. Comparison International works closely with a wide range of change agencies across many sectors and geographies, helping them to target their scarce resources and to achieve their aims by equipping them with powerful Best Practice Benchmarking tools.

Benefits for change agencies:

- fresh insights and perspectives
- challenge conventional wisdom about strengths and improvement opportunities in an industry, a sector, a supply chain - in fact any coherent grouping of organisations
- a value adding service which enables the organisations the agency serves to identify key issues quickly, reliably and efficiently
- assess the current status of the performance and practices of the corporate community
- pinpoint and prioritise improvement opportunities, and stimulate efforts to exploit those opportunities.

Working with Comparison International and PROBE has been incredibly productive. Our joint work has enabled the Agency to bring a new method of diagnostic benchmarking to the Learning and Skills sector

*Jane Owen, (formerly) RQM Programme Advisor
Learning & Skills Development Agency*

If you are a change agency, Comparison International would be delighted to discuss how we might be able to help you to achieve your aims.

Contact us

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