

## Cereals PROBE Case Study: Pursuing Excellence in the Cereals Industry

### KWS UK Ltd, based in Thriplow near Cambridge

Originally formed in 1995 as a result of the merger of Cambridge Plant Breeders and Twyford Seeds Limited, CPB Twyford was acquired by a European consortium of plant breeding specialists in 1996. The company became a wholly owned subsidiary of the German based KWS/Lochow Petkus Group in 2005. With headquarters at Thriplow near Cambridge and a staff of nearly 50, KWS UK Ltd is dedicated to providing growers with innovative new varieties of seed which deliver higher yields, superior disease and pest resistance and performance in adverse conditions, together with quality characteristics suited to an increasingly demanding end-market.



After a period of growth and management changes, KWS UK entered a sustained period of stability and decided that the time was right to examine the way that they did things and to make some improvements. Andrew Newby, Commercial Director, comments: *“There was a genuine will that we wanted to improve the way the company operated and to improve the structures in the company. We had a really good foundation; we had a really good team in place”*

Amanda Lay, HR & Facilities Manager, adds: *“We had been looking at ourselves over the last five years and we had made a number of improvements but it was with a small group of people trying to push those through all of the time, so when PROBE came along we thought it was great opportunity to start looking at the wider picture and to get the views of all the staff and getting them involved.”*

### What is PROBE?



PROBE is one of the world’s leading organisational assessment and best practice benchmarking tools, used in over 30 countries to promote and support the pursuit of Business Excellence across all sectors. Thousands of organisations have benefited from PROBE’s insights and contributed to its unique knowledge base, supported by facilitators and agencies committed to the spread of good business practices that deliver improved organisational performance. Cereals PROBE is based on a simple and clear premise – that the adoption of best practice leads to world class performance. It is a diagnostic process designed to assess an organisation’s key practices, those that drive the organisation forward, and to show how, by improving these key practices, the organisation can impact on its business performance levels.

PROBE is a team process. A cross-section of people within the participating organisation is selected to participate. Selecting team members that represent different levels and functions, including different departments and teams, a team that represents the whole organisation, in terms of seniority, function and role, generates results that reflect the reality of the current situation. This analysis provides the best possible basis for relevant and pertinent improvement activity.

KWS UK undertook their first Cereals PROBE in January 2006, and followed this with a repeat benchmark in April 2007. The first PROBE benchmark identified many strengths, confirming the company's position as being well en-route towards best practice in many areas, while also highlighting a number of areas with potential for improvement. Between the two benchmarks the PROBE team became the company's 'improvement team', investing time and effort in acting on the findings from the first Cereals PROBE. This resulted in the company progressing considerably, from an already strong position, on PROBE's scales of both 'practice' and 'performance'. This case study will examine some of the changes and improvements that were implemented to make this progression possible.



After their first benchmark, KWS UK found themselves, like many of the cereals companies that have so far participated in the Cereals PROBE initiative, sitting comfortably among the bulk of the large sample of other businesses that form the backcloth of PROBE benchmarking. KWS UK and others who were achieving comparable levels of practice and performance would be described by PROBE as being 'Contenders' for achieving true leadership status. 'Contenders' are making progress towards the 'World Class' best practice standards against which PROBE tests an organisation's approaches and achievements, but were still falling considerably short of those standards. The key is to realise that the further a business progresses along the journey, the tougher the journey gets, and to ensure that complacency does not lead to companies falling outside of the contender category. Further work is needed not only to maintain this position but to move towards the World Class category.



KWS UK brought together a team of 10 people from all departments in the company to become the PROBE team. Andrew Newby explains: *"The team was chosen to represent the whole company, a representative from each of the departments, not particularly chosen for being positive or pro-active but to make sure we got the views from all aspects of the business."*

It was clear from this first benchmark that there were many areas where KWS UK were performing very well. This was a very innovative company with good practices in place to take new ideas and develop them for the

marketplace. The culture within the company was one built on strong themes of service quality, with a clear focus on a shared vision and goals. Employees were trained well and felt involved and rewarded for their efforts. But like all good companies, KWS UK wanted to improve further. PROBE had highlighted a number of areas of improvement which the team were determined to act upon.

Amanda Lay recalls that *“We were forever being told that we weren’t communicating well enough with others and with our staff. What the PROBE did was show us that we were actually communicating but it was not always being recognised. We had suggested regular staff meetings but everyone felt that they didn’t want that level of information. We had produced a newsletter in the past, we used e-mail as a way of getting information out and we had started to develop our intranet site. What the PROBE team told us was that a number of staff don’t have time to read e-mail and don’t use it. What we found through the discussions during the PROBE was that we were providing information, that we were providing seven, eight methods of communication with all of our staff, but we still being told we don’t communicate. We decided as a group that we needed to have departmental champions so that each department has one person responsible for ensuring that their department has the information that they need. What we have done is focus. We have given responsibility to a member of staff within each department and realised that different people want different things.”*



KWS UK introduced a new chat forum to their intranet site. It is divided into two sections, one deals with purely work related information, news from the field, links to magazine articles relating to the markets KWS UK are in or looking to expand into, information about visitors to the company etc. The second section is a general forum where staff can put more general things that are not always work related. As KWS UK is on two sites, this system has helped with communication between the sites.

It isn’t just new technology that has improved the communications. *“In one of our barns there is a huge blackboard that was used for stock information, but half of it has now been taken over by the departmental champion and she writes information on it”, explains Amanda Lay. “She will take the information from the intranet and write it up on the board as she knows this is the best way of getting this information to people. We didn’t suggest this, she was thinking outside of the box and it works so well.”*

To encourage staff involvement and communication, changes were made to the annual company meeting, which involved all of the staff and was traditionally held before the staff Christmas party. Amanda recalls that after consultation it was decided to move the company meeting to a different date and to ask each

department to do a short presentation about what had happened to their department over the previous year:

*“These are people who do not usually present and we said they could present their information in whatever format they wanted, so some chose PowerPoint, others used photographs, others just stood up and talked and it was one of the most successful things that we did last year. Every one was delighted to be involved, and from my point of view it was great personal development for all those involved.”*

As well as improving communications with the staff, the PROBE team also looked at ways of improving communications with the customers.

*“This was an area that we had a lot of discussion about”, explains Andrew Newby. “We have done a customer care survey in the past but we got a bit of a backlash and the last thing our customers want over the next six months is somebody coming around and taking up two or three hours of their time to ask them questions about KWS UK. We have a really good relationship with our customers and we feel they would tell us if there was something wrong, but it was just gut feel and the PROBE exercise made us re-think – that we do need to ask question otherwise we are making assumptions that we’re not sure about.”*



*“After some time we came up with an idea of putting together a short questionnaire, just tick boxes, which we would sit down and talk through with our customers at the end of a meeting. We targeted to do about 15 of our 40 plus customers a year and keep them rolling over so that we would speak with them all over time.”*

Although great improvements had been made between the first and second Cereals PROBE benchmarks, there were still things that came up for further improvement during the second benchmark, particularly the visibility and communication of service standards.

*“When this was first brought up at the PROBE session we all said we didn’t have any”, recalls Amanda Lay, “but of course this was wrong. We do have them and we work to them, but we work to them per department. What we weren’t doing was pulling these together into Company standards. So this year we have been collecting all of the department standards, reviewing whether we want them as they currently stand or whether we want to improve them. We will then publish them on the intranet so that they can be measured. We’ll then review them next year.”*

Whilst, great strides have been made to tackle some of the individual issues that Cereal PROBE brought to light, there was a wider benefit from doing it, as Andrew Newby explains:

*“We talked earlier about communication and staff involvement. When you have people saying ‘you don’t communicate with me’ then the best way forward is to get everyone involved. If you take the normal management team and the improvement team we set up through PROBE and the departmental champions, you’ve started to involve everybody in owning something. What we want, and what we now have, is continuous improvement. We can all look at ourselves and say, ‘Yes we’ve made the changes. We’ve all been party to those changes and we have become a ‘company improvement team.’ The whole company is involved.”*



*“I think the difference with the Cereal PROBE initiative was ‘the feel’ for the whole initiative if you like. I don’t want to pick certain bits of it and say, ‘In the first one the customer care thing was highlighted and the customer complaint procedure was put in place and we just ticked a box.’ We didn’t – I think the difference was the fact that we’d had the meetings, that we’d discussed things, that people were more aware of things. It was the overall team spirit. People were optimistic and they don’t have high*

*spirits if the confidence isn’t there, and the confidence came from communicating what we were doing, and they feel comfortable with it.”*

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