

PROBE for Cereals: Pursuing Excellence in the Cereals Industry

A case study of Simpsons Ready Foods Ltd Manchester

Simpsons Ready Foods Ltd was established in 1910 by William Simpson, and nearly 100 years later the business is still in the hands of the Simpson family, William and Andrew. Based in Manchester, Simpsons make and pack products for many companies. The range includes ready meals, vegetable meals, ethnic dishes and a growing range of cook in and pour-over sauces. Simpsons has a track record of a century of continued innovation and development of different food stuffs and different forms of packaging designed to bring convenient and 'clean' products to the market. Operating in a very competitive market place, Simpsons boast amongst their customers most if not all of the major supermarkets and food retailers.

Over the last five years Simpsons has seen considerable growth in all areas of its business. This growth, plus the competitive nature of the food processing industry, resulted in time and resources being invested in a continuous improvement strategy. As part of that strategy Simpsons decided to undertake a best practice benchmarking exercise, called Cereals PROBE.

Simpsons first became involved in the PROBE process in February 2006 because the idea of understanding and Promoting Business Excellence within the company really appealed to them. They benchmarked for a second time in March 2007, to get an understanding how far they had progressed, and to pinpoint further opportunities for improvement.

This case study outlines the findings from the PROBE benchmarks and details how the company approached dealing with the identified areas for improvement.



Julie Twamley, Simpsons' Human Resources Manager, comments:

"We thought the idea of benchmarking against other companies would be beneficial to us, to see what strengths we've got and what weaknesses we have. We found it very eye-opening in many areas. It confirmed that we did have a lot of strengths, but it also exposed some weaknesses in areas that we didn't really think were a problem. Basically, we found it very good!"

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.

Simpsons brought together a team from their total of 120 staff; the team comprised a true cross section of the business and was made up of a Director, the HR Manager, representatives from the buying department, sales, new product development and a production operative.

Bringing a diverse team together presented its own challenges, not least people being away from their jobs. Julie confirms that *“Getting the right team together is crucial, and I think we did a great job of getting together people that represented different areas of our whole company. We had a good range of people and this led to a good debate over some of the questions. We all had different views and it made us all aware that there were misunderstandings to some degree in some areas and other people didn't anticipate what problems other areas had. It opened up our eyes to different things.”*





After the first benchmark in February 2006 the overall benchmarking scores for Simpsons were good. The process confirmed that the company has a lot of strengths. Simpsons and its people listen to customers and understand what drives value and quality for them. It listens to its workforce and had a clear competitive positioning within its market. It is an innovative company, with an innovative environment and reproducible processes for improving existing, designing new services and responding to service innovations from competitors, which in turn lead to customer growth.

That first benchmark also identified a number of areas where improvements could be made. The first area was communicating and sharing the company values and ethos:

“The company ethos - did everybody know and understand what the company wanted? The answer we got back was ‘no’. Whilst they are clearly stated on everyone’s contract of employment, team members, particularly those that had been at the company a number of years, were saying that they were not aware of the aims of the company or the company ethos.”

As a result Julie and the Simpsons team have made changes to their induction process, so that the company’s vision, mission and goals are clearly outlined and discussed.

“We now do a structured induction. People aren’t put on the (production) line straightaway. One of the first things we convey to everyone is the aims of the company. They are still included in their contracts of employment, but rather than just giving them the document and saying ‘read through this and if there is anything you don’t understand come back’ we take a lot of time reading through the document together and highlighting and discussing certain points.”

Another area that was highlighted for improvement was “employee empowerment”.

“Our shop floor representative felt that they were not empowered to do certain things on the line. In reality, we (the Management team) felt that they were making changes and improvements, almost sub consciously, but the general thought around the factory was, ‘no, we are not allowed to do that’. Whilst we have always believed that the staff did have this empowerment, we decided to show our support by setting up fortnightly team leader meetings where they get together and discuss and solve issues amongst themselves. We, the management team only get involved if they have a problem that they feel needs our attention. This approach has been very successful.”

Simpsons have introduced other approaches to improve communication:

“From the first PROBE, employee contact was an area we needed to improve, making everyone aware of what’s going on in the business. We instigated a newsletter, which we had not had before. We let everyone know what’s going on, what new products are coming on board. We give them feedback about customer deliveries, how we are doing on support, if the customers are pleased with us. Again, that has been a great success.”



“One of the other areas that we needed to improve that was highlighted by PROBE was our need to measure our employee satisfaction. Although we haven’t gone as far as a formal written survey we do spend more time walking around and talking to people to get their feedback. Most of the time people would rather talk to you about something than write it down, and this personal touch has worked for us and is appreciated more by everyone.”

Another key area that PROBE examines is the ‘Cycle of Virtue’. This relates to the practice of providing employees with sound training, the opportunity to feel truly involved and a recognition and reward system that encourages them to do a good job and provides an incentive to continue so doing. This was a key area for Simpsons to address.

“At the time of the first PROBE we did provide some training but it tended to be based on our legal requirements. We did a basic food hygiene course, which people thought was a chore – sitting in the meeting room looking at the screen. So we’ve sorted out a better delivery method, with a workbook they can take home - it takes eight weeks to complete. So by listening to our employees and adapting our training we have made it into something more enjoyable. We have also introduced more NVQs (National Vocational Qualifications) on Information Technology, Food, Drink and Manufacturing. Everyone is getting on board for the training now which is very very good as it improves our performance.”

It wasn’t just the technical training that was improved.

“About 30% of our factory employees are overseas workers, so we introduced English lessons, which they’re all thoroughly enjoying, and they are improving their communication skills. As their English has improved we have been able to teach them new skills and some of them have been promoted, so it has been a major benefit for everyone.”

Simpsons scored well on many aspects of PROBE’s ‘Material Processing’ module, including:

- production cycle times
- the lead time it takes to bring new products on line; and
- no unplanned orders or the need to reprioritise as a result



The benchmarking process highlighted the need for some improvements to production layout, equipment changeover times and maintenance. Simpsons have put a lot of work into improving these areas.

"Myself and the Chief Engineer have spent a lot of time organising our planned maintenance. We knew we had to improve our approach to maintenance, and PROBE made everyone aware that it needed to be done and how important it is."

"We have identified real gains in these and other areas, especially as we have now set up a more rigorous approach to our process control, and in particular internal defects. If there are more than a certain number of defects in one hour then there's a problem, so we stop the line and we find out why. Previously, in the pouch department, we weren't really counting. We were just "Oh, the line's going along and if it's no good put it in the bin and throw it away". Now we check on an hourly basis how many pouches we have thrown away. If there's over a certain amount, then 'Stop! There's something wrong, we don't want that much wastage."

Waste, and a company's environmental impact, is a higher priority for many businesses wishing to stay competitive. PROBE examines a number of areas relating to the "Impact on Society". Simpsons have already begun to address these issues.

"We've improved on our recycling. We recycle all cardboard now. We've got a compactor on site compacting all of our cardboard. And we're striving to do more. Obviously new regulations come along all of the time, but we have been trying to progress and stay ahead in this area".

The team at Simpsons has come along way in a short space of time, implementing new ways of doing things as a result of the PROBE exercise, but they recognise that there are still things to be done.

"One of the areas that was highlighted for attention was performance management - what information were we collecting from our customers? And what are we doing with this information to help us improve the business? We have bought a new computer system to help us with this area, but we need to spend some time getting it installed and collecting the information we need. Again, we had always planned to upgrade our computer system - PROBE helped us confirm that we were on the right track, but these developments take time and PROBE didn't make us change our minds with regards to our plans just so that we could get some quick wins"

For Simpsons, undertaking PROBE was made possible because of the help of the Red Meat Industry Forum and the Cereals Industry Forum, who subsidised the two benchmarks.

“Without their help we wouldn’t have undertaken PROBE. I would recommend it to other companies that it is worth doing. It’s an eye opener. It identifies all your strengths and weaknesses in a fair way, and you can achieve a lot”



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