



Case study: Photofabrication Ltd

Keeping the customer satisfied

A small component manufacturer, Photofabrication specialises in creating bespoke prototype components for a range of customers. The company had recently promoted new directors, who were keen to discover if there were areas of the business could be improved. A review of the company using the IfM's prioritisation and strategy planning tools allowed the team to proceed confidently with their plans for growth.

Company background

Established around 35 years ago Photofabrication is a specialist chemical etching company, making a myriad of components and prototypes for manufacturing companies and start-ups. The St Neots- based firm has a range of 57,000 different products, drawing customers from all sectors and industries, from individual inventors to OEMs. The company competes on the quality of service – an important factor for the firm's customers. As well as the chemical etching, the firm also offers a range of other manufacturing processes; these include Stamping and Laser cutting.

The company recently underwent a board-level restructure which saw Operations Director Paul Rea and Commercial Director Neil Shorten appointed as directors of the ever expanding business. The firm currently turns over in excess of £2.5m per year and has recently expanded into mainland Europe with the launch of a new French language website.

The Problem

When Paul Rea and his colleague Commercial Director Neil Shorten took over the day-to-day running of the business, both were passionate about the future success of the company. They were keen to discover how the business measured up against best manufacturing practice. Paul explained: "The prioritisation exercise confirmed that the business was in very good health in all areas, but not necessarily world class in any one particular area, and we want the company to be world class.

"We often did things because they felt right, but we see no benefit in reinventing the wheel. We wanted to take lessons from best manufacturing practices and apply them here."

While both were experienced managers, the pair were keen to develop their business strategy capabilities, and so were advised to speak to the IfM.

The solution

IfM Industrial practitioner John McManus evaluated the company and ran through a series of options designed to take the business forward.

Paul Rea explained: "We focus on providing a customer experience that keeps people coming back to us, so improving areas which impact on this was really important."

The prioritisation work identified a number of projects which would enhance the customer service experience. "We plan to implement them all," said Mr Rea. "Making sure we focus on the ones which have the biggest impact first."

One of these areas was in terms of error reduction. Paul Rea explained: "We were measuring the right things, but we didn't have an over-arching process which could identify the root cause of a given problem and guide the staff on what to do to fix it. This meant we weren't putting a big enough dent into the error rate"

"So far the work in this area has led to an error reduction of 50%. It's an iterative process and we are going to keep going."

The company also looked at long term capability development of its workforce.

"All our 35 staff have completed the NVQ in Business Improvement Techniques where they get a chance to see the bigger picture in relation to the business. I think the workforce now feel far more involved than they did before."

Future plans

In the past few months, Photofabrication have created a new online presence for and have just launched a French website through 'Passport to Export' which they hope will develop business opportunities on mainland Europe.

"We're grateful for the involvement of the IfM, they confirmed to us what we were doing well and pointed out areas with which we could make improvements. I think it has helped the business grow more quickly than perhaps it would have done," said Mr Rea.

Further information

Contact us via email: ifm-enquiries@eng.cam.ac.uk

www.ifm.eng.cam.ac.uk/working