

Case study: Swiftclean

Business happy to put theory into practice

Swiftclean provides a range of building hygiene and fire safety compliance services including legionella control and ductwork/ventilation systems cleaning to ensure organisations comply with the latest health and safety and/or insurance requirements. The company wanted to develop a strategy to drive its expansion plans forward. The company directors signed up to the EMIG scheme (Essex Manufacturing Innovation and Growth), delivered by the University of Cambridge Institute for Manufacturing and supported by the county council to see if it could help them achieve their ambitious goals.

Company background

The firm began trading in 1982 and specialises in hygiene building services. It carries out a range of services – including ductwork cleaning, legionella control and water system cleaning and monitoring. The company with head office based in Essex also performs risk assessments for everything from the potentially deadly legionella bacteria to fire safety within kitchen extract systems. The range of service offering is what differentiates the firm from its competitors.

It draws customers from across the public and private sector. Half of its business comes from being a specialist sub-contractor for facility management firms; the other half is 'sold' direct to customers.

Its Southend-on-Sea head office oversees a national operation. Turning over in excess of £4m a year, the company employs 80 people and has offices in Leicester and Scotland, as well as account managers in locations around the UK.

Why EMIG and the IfM?

Group Managing Director Gary Nicholls describes himself as an advocate of getting fresh perspectives on business as a way to boost growth. The company had a range of objectives they wanted to pursue, but wanted the benefit of an external viewpoint on their plans.

Mr Nicholls explained: "I'm a big believer in the old adage that there is more than one way to skin a cat. I know that you can't be an expert in everything and that there are other management and business techniques out there which could help take the company forward."

Mr Nicholls said the company wanted to expand and wanted to analyse the way it was marketing and selling its services.

"We as directors wanted to get some clarification on the direction we were taking the business, and to help us focus on the things we needed to work on achieve our aims.

"I was referred to the EMIG programme and after a conversation with Essex County Council's innovation and growth team; I was put in touch with the IfM."

Mr Nicholls said EMIG was attractive for a number of reasons:

"This scheme was fantastic as not only was it fully funded, especially in the current climate when money is tight, but the University of Cambridge involvement gave it a lot of credibility as far as we were concerned."

The plan of action

Senior Industrial Fellow Dr Derek Ford and his team visited the company and carried out an initial diagnostic.

“Dr Ford spent a day with me and my fellow directors evaluating where we thought the business should be. We quickly identified a few areas we needed to work on, the main one being a focused strategy.”

The company took part in four workshops which eventually led to the development of a structured action plan. “We decided on three projects which we thought would progress the business. First we wanted to plan the strategic locations from which we wanted to grow and how these might be resourced.

“Secondly we offer a range of Health and Safety compliant services, many of our competitors can only deliver one, so we wanted to offer a package of services. The question was how we market that business package both internally and externally.”

Mr Nicholls said this was an important consideration as by offering packaged services they could make their offering more cost effective to customers.

“For example if we were to do a system clean on a kitchen extractor system, we would usually have to wait while the chemicals take effect. A more cost effective solution might also be to offer the customer a water tank monitoring service at the same time.”

The final project was to digitise the firm's information processes, to save time on form filling and to share information more effectively.

The company says

The firm has only just started to implement the action plan, but Mr Nicholls has high hopes: “It has definitely been a positive experience, it's early days yet in terms of impact on the business, but it has meant that we could focus on our strengths. I would and indeed have recommended it to other businesses.”

The Managing Director said he believed the scheme would help his business achieve its initial aims: “I expect the eventual output to be growth. To help the business to grow I'll use whatever resource I can lay my hands on. The IfM helped us to focus on the things we could do more effectively.

“The fact it was a free resource – we just had to supply our time – was something I thought we should take advantage of.

“EMIG was very positive; it was great to see investment like this in businesses when times are very tough.

“I hope the business will grow and become more profitable. Ultimately I believe the scheme will help achieve growth more rapidly.”

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