

GEOCEL case study

Company profile

Plymouth based Geocel is one of the UK's leading suppliers of sealants and adhesives and is a strategic partner of Dow Corning and Dow Chemical Limited. With an annual turnover of over £18 million, the company has over a quarter of a century of international experience in the construction and industrial sectors, providing sealants, coatings and associated chemical products. Geocel, which employs 85 staff, was the winner of the West and South West region HSE Health and Safety Award at the 2005 Orange National Business Awards.



The problem

Back in 1999 the company was struggling to survive, work was sparse and morale was low. Management had to

concentrate solely on winning business and generating cash. As a result, the company was facing several claims from members of staff regarding minor health and safety issues. The company recognised that if they were to go forward they had to agree a development plan. The outcome was a four-point strategy - the generation of more sales; a reduction in the number of manual tasks on their production system; an improvement in their machinery; and the establishment of a comprehensive health and safety strategy.

The solution

The company's new Chief Executive Officer, Will Barclay, and Operations Director, Bob Mitchell, took up the challenge of making the necessary changes happen. Will had a vision, 'I wanted to grow a profitable business but make it fun and safe, for everyone to share in.'

Their first task was to make the shop floor a safer place. Bob decided to involve the workforce in the design of the workplace. *'This was their working environment so it*



Will Barclay, Managing Director (right) and Bob Mitchell, Operations Director (left) with Claire Boniface, a production operative, at the box packing station where boxes are now filled and sealed automatically, thanks to new work machinery and procedures



Will Barclay, Managing Director, operating the box vacuum lifter, a device used to reduce manual handling of heavy boxes

made sense to let them have a say in how it should be laid out. Workers decided, for example, on the positions of gangways, the ergonomic layout of the production machines and access routes.'

Despite huge financial constraints at the time, Will and Bob spent £1000 on some much-needed equipment. Some of the female workers on the shop floor were using heavy-duty staplers with their feet to make up the cardboard boxes. The company invested money to purchase tape and taping equipment, which made the work easier and reduced the risk of a potential accident. The expenditure also proved a positive move in terms of worker involvement in that it helped convince the workforce that management really were intent on turning the company around – and taking their employees' health and safety seriously.

The next step was to bring in a health and safety consultant, and a company health and safety strategy was established from the findings in the consultant's recommendations.

Members of staff were encouraged to take responsibility for themselves and their colleagues through knowledge and awareness of risks. Everyone was encouraged to report freely on what was not right.

Health and safety advisers were appointed from the staff for each specialised area, including production, compounding, warehouse staff and the laboratory. A health and safety committee was established with representation from the workforce (the advisers) with Customer Services Adviser, Sonia Stewart, chairing the group. The representatives are changed annually to give everyone an opportunity to sit on the committee.

Sonia said: 'We meet quarterly. I always remind everyone that the responsibility of each individual is to look out for the health and safety of others as well as themselves. We ask, for example, that any defects on machines or any other concerns are reported immediately and not held back until our meetings.'



Will Barclay, Managing Director, centre, Bob Mitchell, Operations Director, on the right, and Craig Blackly, a Production Operative, with the drum roller conveyor system, a manual handling device

A daily production meeting provides further opportunity for worker involvement and communication and serves as a forum for any issues – including health and safety – that staff might have.

The results

The benefits have been enormous. There has been a huge reduction in accidents and lost time. The company now has a four-year record of production without a lost-time injury. Staff turnover is extremely low and morale is at a healthy level. The improvements have significantly reduced insurance costs relating to personal injury and liability.

Bob Mitchell said: ‘We are delighted with the results. Our business has improved and we have reduced risks and costs significantly. We are constantly reviewing the way we do things as a group. Our worker involvement policy does not stand still. It is a continuing process.’

Production Supervisor Alison Dunkley, said: ***‘Everybody is involved in health and safety and everybody has their input.*** There’s a lot of heavy-duty machinery here, but the safety levels are high. Any problems are reported straight away and they are dealt with. Staff morale is now much higher. ***The awareness of health and safety policies, and the protection and guidance they give, makes our lives easier.’***

The company has grown and profits are healthy. Since its initial expenditure, the company has been able to invest in new machinery on a consistent basis. There has been a total spend of £900 000 to date on modern production machinery which has further improved health and safety in the workplace.

The future

The company will continue to invest in new machinery. It also plans to train more of its employees to complete their own health and safety risk assessments, which are currently carried out by management.

Says Bob, ***‘We recognise that our workers are the experts on the shop floor. They are the people doing the job. They, more than anyone, know the risks involved.’***

With a strategic health and safety policy now well in place, the company intends to develop a further strategy that addresses occupational health.