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Machinery

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BERR explains

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Completing the journey

Hone-All's move to a new factory is, in fact, the culmination of a journey started in 1999.

A clear management structure, efficient working and modern corporate image are end results, as *Machinery* heard

Standing in the middle of Hone-All Precision's new 20,000 ft² factory in Leighton Buzzard, husband and wife team Colin and Andrea Rodney point out that little remains of the original building. Twice the size of this sub-contracting company's previous home, the site has been completely refurbished, with only the exterior brickwork surviving intact.

The decision to relocate the 25-employee business was not taken lightly. Operating from two sites in Dunstable and Houghton Regis was becoming inefficient and divisive, and there was little room for expansion. On the other hand, a new purpose-built factory was simply too expensive to contemplate. The alternative was to find a suitable unit to refurbish, although a semi-derelict warehouse was a very different challenge.

Relocating within five miles of its old Dunstable factory has enabled the specialist sub-contractor to retain its entire workforce, all of whom, says Colin Rodney, have contributed to the numerous environmental, health and safety, and production efficiency initiatives intended to provide the best possible working environment.

"Doubling in size has enabled us to create a shopfloor layout with a logical flow of work through the factory and to eliminate possible bottlenecks," he explains. "The intention is to avoid time-wasting 'back and forth' journeys for materials and people."

Everyone was consulted about the relocation before the decision was made and many employees did express concerns, especially about the dilapidated state of the proposed new premises.

However, once reassured about the financial feasibility of the planned refurbishment, suggestions for possible improvements came thick and fast.

CONSULTATION EXERCISE

Machinist Gary Brandon, for one, did not hesitate to say what he wanted to see in the new factory. "Because of the physical limitations of the old building, machines had been fitted into the space available. I wanted them to be grouped together by type, so that relevant tooling and fixturing would be to hand rather than scattered around the factory. Installing 'shadow boards' throughout was another suggestion aimed at eliminating time

spent searching for things. I reckon this is saving up to 40 per cent on set-up times."

Painted in the corporate colours of blue and white, the interior of the new Leighton Buzzard factory is clean, bright and designed to be environment friendly and extremely energy efficient. An integral part of Hone-All's commitment to lean manufacturing principles, the emphasis throughout is on reducing waste, whether of time, effort or money.

"It's very much about applying common sense to the running of a business," says Andrea Rodney. "There is a mystique about 'lean' but the reality is that it is very straightforward."

Although the new factory layout with



Husband-and-wife team Andrea and Colin Rodney consulted all employees before making the move



One of the suggestions from the workforce was to locate similar machines together, thus centralising shared tooling and workholding, for example

its emphasis on lean production reflects the input of individuals at every level of the business, it fell to Bob Hills, works manager, to make sure that the shopfloor was laid out in strict accordance with the final decision. "It was essential to minimise the disruption to production and to keep machines running as much as possible," he says, "so we completed the move in two phases. Everything did go according to plan, even though we had some unscheduled breakdowns and calibration issues to deal with as a direct result of moving the machines."

Completion of the relocation project marked the culmination of a journey that actually began back in 1999 when Hone-All was approached by Cranfield University with an offer of consultancy that would be part funded by government. "The offer of 50 per cent matched funding was tempting enough to persuade Colin and me to allow someone into the business to give it a once-over health check," says Mrs Rodney.

Cranfield duly presented its findings but the estimated cost of carrying out the recommended improvements was around £14,000 – more than twice the amount that Hone-All had intended to spend. "It was somewhat unrealistic for a company of our size at that time," says Mr Rodney. "So we agreed that Cranfield's role should be to monitor our progress rather than being involved in the actual implementation. That said, Cranfield's input has been extremely helpful. Initially it highlighted, for example, that the lines of communication with the shopfloor

were fragmented and that the workflow through the Dunstable factory left a lot to be desired."

By the time Hone-All had responded to all the changes recommended by Cranfield, the cost of the consultancy project had risen to nearer £60,000. Stopping production for a week to move all the machine tools out into the yard of the old factory and then repositioning them within the new workshop was just one of several contributing factors.

COSTLY BUT GOOD VALUE

"It did cost quite a lot more than we had expected," says Mrs Rodney, "but by the end of the first year we had seen our productivity increase by 20 per cent without any additional investment in new machines, profitability had increased by at least 12 per cent, and it was possible to say 'yes, we have definitely had value from the programme'."

Both directors admit that the thought of asking a university for help had never occurred to them but they have no regrets, even though Cranfield recommended a transition from an owner-managed business to one with a clearly defined management team structure. This, for Mr Rodney as managing director proved to be the most challenging recommendation of all.

"Back in 1994, before Andrea came into the business, there were just six people involved in sub-contract honing and I was very much hands-on and focused on short-term priorities. Many owner-managers fall into the same trap

of thinking that only they can do the job to the standard it needs doing to. However, if you want to grow a business you have to bring people along with you, otherwise there is a discrepancy between what you are seeking to achieve and the skills available to help you achieve it. I've had to learn to delegate and to trust people to do many of the things that were previously solely my responsibility."

One of those involved in this process is Lisa Gosling, who joined Hone-All as an admin assistant. Now general manager, she is responsible for scheduling and customer liaison, personnel and, jointly with quality manager Wayne Wilson, health and safety.

She comments: "I have been given the opportunity and access to training that has enabled me to progress and, in career terms, this has more than compensated for my decision to move from a high street bank into an engineering environment.

"Customer service has always been central to my role within Hone-All and as the company has evolved, so too have the administration procedures. We are focused on realistic and achievable delivery times because customers would rather have their work delivered by the agreed date than have Hone-All offer a delivery date that we have no realistic possibility of meeting. However, should we fall behind schedule for any reason we do inform the customer of the situation immediately and of our progress in resolving the issue. This, from the customer's perspective, is far more



While improved layout offers tangible efficiency gains, the positive effect that a modern facility certainly has on customers is not so easily measured

reassuring than empty promises or, worse, ignoring the issue altogether."

In any busy sub-contracting shop there is always another urgent job waiting to be done but, cautions Ted Barchard, sales manager: "You cannot plan the workload in the same way as you would in an OEM/large batch environment. Development of the RedAnt production control system has been our response to the requirement for a production control system that takes account of multi-customer precedence and priorities."

Backed by a group of SMEs who wanted a system that relied on straightforward terms rather than computer jargon, Stone Technology's RedAnt software has proved invaluable, says quality manager Mr Wilson. "Errors could have a serious impact on this business, so everything is geared to preventing mistakes," he says. "RedAnt enables me to check for any instances of non-conformance, while retaining small business flexibility in the way in which we integrate inspection and quality control."

The implementation of RedAnt is an indication of Hone-All's steady progress over the past decade. Prior to Cranfield's involvement, the company moved into gun drilling and then into deep hole boring. These processes are central to the

ISO 9001:2000 sub-contractor's activities but in recent years Hone-All has expanded its machining and ancillary services to a 'one stop shop' capability.

This, according to Mrs Rodney, has been the most significant factor behind the move to Leighton Buzzard. With a broadening of Hone-All's capabilities came a growing realisation that future investment in production equipment could possibly be influenced more by the space limitations at the Dunstable site than by the requirements of an increasingly diverse customer base.

MACHINES BY NEED, NOT BY FIT

"In opting for a phased move into the new factory, we created an opportunity to purchase the machines we need rather than machines that would fit in. To date we have added two honing machines, a deep hole borer, and a facing and centering machine – which has released capacity on our CNC lathes – and this additional investment, while not extending our machining envelope, is bringing further efficiency improvements and ensuring we can satisfy the demand for shorter lead times," Mrs Rodney adds.

Mr Rodney is adamant that consolidating on to a single site has also

eased the pressure on the management team, the previously separate manual honing section having now relocated to the mezzanine area of the new factory. The mezzanine runs virtually the entire length of the building, allowing 2,500 litre cutting oil tanks equipped with retractable hoses to be located at one end. Machine tanks no longer have to be filled by hand, while swarf spinning allows oil to be reclaimed and a higher price to be obtained for the swarf.

"These and other measures such as energy efficient lighting mean that we will, over time, recoup up to 10 per cent of the total investment, while productivity improvements should contribute at least 15 per cent," says the managing director.

"However, one aspect that defies a formal cost justification is customer perception. Hone-All now has the facilities to match what I believe is already a strong corporate image. This is crucial in terms of winning new business from advanced technology industry sectors such as motorsport or aerospace, because the market leaders in these sectors are themselves conscious of the image they project and the positive effect it has on their businesses." □