



DRIVEN BY CLIENTS, COSTS AND SUSTAINABILITY

Modern construction projects are expensive. Progressive SME, Geo. Houlton & Sons Ltd, decided to demonstrate the best practice and cost-efficiency it needed using Fast-Track-14. The Hull-based building company has been adapting to change since 1879. Now, it sees sound environmental and sustainable management as the edge keeping it ahead of major contractors drawn by the area's increasingly attractive projects. FT-14, it calculates, has put it a year ahead and qualified it to compete.

Having recently secured the largest project ever in its 128 year history, family-owned building company, Geo. Houlton & Sons Ltd, knows that having an effective environmental management system (EMS) in place makes good business sense.

"Otherwise, we could have been precluded from exciting projects that are attracting attention to the Hull area," explains Quality Manager, Peter Laslett. But past experience with ISO 9001 has shown, he says, how "achieving standards can be a very drawn out procedure."

Having now completed a six month-long Fast-Track-14 (FT-14) programme, the SME employing 161 is moving on swiftly to ISO 14001 accreditation. "We recently appointed SGS as auditors. If we hadn't been on FT-14, we would still be thinking about an EMS. It has probably saved us a very important year at a commercially exciting time," says Laslett.

Houlton's primary driver, however, is customer priorities and its campaign for efficiency is targeting waste in all forms - including lost time!

"Many of our clients want to see a positive response to the environment agenda," explains Laslett. Hull City Council and the East Riding of Yorkshire Council are part of the company's blue-chip list that includes Croda, North Yorkshire Police, Birds Eyes Wall Ltd, MFI, the University of Hull and the NHS.

Best practice

"It may not be quite correct to say that we are under pressure, but there is considerable interest in environmental and sustainable issues surrounding building projects ... and ways of cutting construction costs!"

"We recognised that we needed an inclusive view of all these issues to remain a market leader in the Hull area, particularly as attractive, high-profile projects interest larger contractors."

"We were alerted to FT-14 during a Construction Excellence Best Practice Club meeting. Our experience with conventional external consultants had sometimes been one of slow progress with too many diversions. In creating our own EMS on FT-14, we asked ourselves the two-fold question, how could we use the programme to give us the impetus we needed to move forward, and secondly how could we adapt it into our existing management system? Looking into the programme carefully, we were convinced."

"The monthly peer-group workshops are extremely effective. They proved a good way of providing the sharp focus we were looking for, setting targets that are all but impossible to ignore. You don't want to fall behind the timeframe. You also don't want to trail behind in the eyes of the rest of your group, even though you come to know them well as colleagues. That is why we felt FT-14 really would be the system for us."

FT-14 was developed by ISYS International, which implements the half-year programme throughout the construction industry in partnership with regional construction bodies and major clients

Participants work together closely in peer-groups, using a powerful, web-based interactive information and communication resource - the ISO 14001 Toolkit - to access detailed step-by-step guidance, document templates and discussion forums.

Crucially, the online system also means that ISYS - and company executives - can monitor progress constantly, identifying where individual support is needed. Equally importantly, those on the programme share problems and ideas to reach better solutions.

Moreover, managers also meet physically. Once a month, they are supported in local, structured peer-group workshops - known to be enjoyable but demanding - with expert support from ISYS.

By focusing on identifying and controlling environmental risks, FT-14 helps companies to achieve legal and regulatory compliance, while demonstrating environmental commitment to their key stakeholders. Other business benefits include improved resource efficiency, reduced pollution and lower waste treatment and disposal costs. Companies can also enhance their corporate image, creating a real competitive edge as sustainable demands rise.

FT-14 also creates the framework to support other contemporary management systems, such as Quality (ISO 9001), Occupational Health & Safety (OHSAS 18001) and Investors in People (IIP).

Houlton summaries its priorities in building an EMS on FT-14 as a pragmatic concern for client needs, cost benefits, time management and role of design.



Peter Laslett, Quality Manager, and Paul Dickerson, Managing Director, celebrate FT-14 success in York.



"Showing best practice means concentrating on many features, including technology and environmental issues. These include pollution, waste, energy use and site impacts. As FT-14 emphasises, our performance very much depends on our own supply chain and, while we can't achieve everything overnight, we will be putting pressure on our own suppliers soon.

We do want to cut all forms of waste, which is where our own suppliers come in. For example, when contractors are due to start work, it is important that they have specified the correct materials, but also that they have them ready on site. Otherwise, they are wasting another valuable resource - time!

A further feature stressed in FT-14 that has surprised us is the extent to which most people don't realise the high potential that exists for legal action against almost everyone for environmental infringements.

The truth is that many regulations are simply not well known by the people whose job it is to be aware. Nor are they routinely brought to our attention. The harsh implications of environmental legislation on every business are now every bit as tough as HSE.

If you look closely around the construction industry, how many managers on site know that? In what I suspect is a good many cases where they don't, there is usually no problem. But a transgression can lead to a heavy fine. And then there is the additional cost of any ensuing clean-up. Overall, it can be horrendous."

The continuous review intrinsic to an effective EMS, goes further still. "Many things still take place in construction where the full potential impacts are not considered. The local site environment is one. Quite rightly, road users complain about surface mud and traffic disruption. Residents complain about smell, dust and noise. Work sites attract children. Applying the standard pragmatically through FT-14 means that local managers now look at these issues on a daily basis. You must appreciate the user's viewpoint and today that user is the public, as well as the client."

One drawback addressed by FT-14, and its systematic approach to helping organisations of all sizes to recognise the underlying aims of environmental and sustainable principles, is the potential it creates for them to go far beyond the simple compliance often associated with EMS.

"Through the FT-14 system, you become confident that your EMS is going to

achieve the end result you intended," says Laslett. "The next stage is then how well you customise it to your own activities."

As an example, the company operates a waste transfer station in its construction yard. Previously, all waste was removed by a licensed contractor. However, more recently, by separating waste into different strands, the company is saving approximately £1000.00 a month in waste charges.

"This is the result of asking people to put the right waste into the right place. Just think of the saving potential for routinely doing likewise on site. The same approach applies to our use of landfill, depletion of resources such as timber, energy and so on. It has to be a progressive process."

Raising sustainable awareness

Similar foresight applies to all stages of project development. "Though not designers ourselves, design has an important impact. Educating our design team to be aware of sustainability is part of the process," explains Laslett.

A current project includes the development of the new Hull Construction Skills Centre for Hull College. "The design is heavily influenced by environmental considerations that will involve ground heat technology, a sophisticated energy management system, IT controlled louvre windows and a wind power system. Understanding the implications of these swiftly emerging technologies is crucial to us."

With 2008 turnover projected at around £50 million, Houlton are preparing for a project that will keep it busy for three years. At a value of £13.5 million, Phase I of the new Bishop Burton College of Agriculture in Hull will be the largest project the company has carried out in its history, with a £12 million Phase II in the pipeline.

Completion will mark out the College as a market leader as a land based education provider. It may also lead to a high-profile training role for the 2012 Olympics, Laslett believes. Clearly, sustainability is going to have important implications.

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The East Riding Treasure House in Beverley brings together local archive, library, art gallery and museum material.