

## **ONS engages staff to cut out waste and boost efficiency through embedding continuous improvement**



**By Iestyn Armstrong-Smith, Bridge PR**

*Must do better. Why don't we get it right first time? What do you mean you did that yesterday; we did exactly the same thing last week. Duplication, wasted effort and resources. The messages read like school reports of a bygone era and yet organisations throughout the UK are looking for improvements. They are seeking to be more efficient, lean, agile, and cost effective.*

Improvement programmes to cut out waste and boost efficiencies come in all shapes and sizes; some are highly complex, while others can be elegantly straightforward, and, yet provide a solid base for reproducing improvements time and time again.

An approach developed by the process improvement consultants the Burge Hughes Walsh Partnership, and tailored by its senior partner, Stephen Walsh, for the Business Data Division of The Office for National Statistics (ONS) exemplifies a programme that can be applied readily to a multi-department organisation. It engages all staff at every level in the quest for efficiency, waste reduction and quality, changing the culture of the business so that continuous improvement is embedded firmly within the organisation.

The Business Data Division in Newport employs over 500 people. This is a very diverse multi-department division of ONS that seeks to engage with all members of staff in the continuous improvement of its entire business. The drivers for its Business Improvement Programme are quality and efficiency - and everyone has the opportunity to get involved.

*“We are a process driven business and in processes there will be waste. We, therefore, look for continuous improvement throughout the division and as our staff are our main resource we believe that it is important that they engage in our Business Improvement Programme to assist with moving the business forward. We are always examining our processes and reviewing them to maximise quality and our efficiency in all we do and our staff play an important part in achieving our goals. It is they who have the knowledge and therefore it is logical that they have input,”* says Ann Lewis, Head of Business Operations / Deputy Director, Business Data Division, ONS.

The division has always been innovative in developing ideas for change and it was aware that one of the other ONS offices (the General Register Office in Southport) had brought in external expertise to help with its improvement programme. The results attained assisted by Stephen Walsh were well known and impressed Ann Lewis and her colleagues in Newport. Stephen Walsh then became a consultant to the division.

*“Stephen had helped the Southport division achieve a lot and we contracted him to help replicate some of the good ideas here in Business Data. Our part of ONS has a lot of staff, many who are junior level, so it was essential to provide tools to suit everyone so that they could engage in the programme. He has enabled this to happen in every way. He is extremely flexible, matching content to precisely our business needs. This means we get a bespoke approach to our programme that is tailored precisely to our need/requirements,”* says Ann Lewis.

There are four key elements to the division’s Business Improvement Programme:

- Focus on Improvement (Focus)
- The Ideas Database
- ‘Rapid’ Improvement Workshops (Rapid – some readers will recognise these as having roots in Kaizen-Blitz style workshops)
- Working Together Workshops.

‘Focus’ is a series of training events that all staff are invited to. Initially led by Stephen Walsh, these sessions help staff think in a different way about what they do, their part in the business and how the business operates. It helps them achieve efficiency gains by focusing on improving their processes to deliver better customer satisfaction (both internal and external). A key part of the rollout involved training staff to deliver the ‘Focus’ workshops themselves and Stephen developed a ‘train- the- trainer’ programme to create in-house facilitators.

*“Focus is a great way to effect a change in culture. When they come back from this training event they can easily identify waste,”* says Ann Lewis.

In addition, the division takes the old idea of a suggestion box to new levels with its Ideas Database. This provides a repository for recording problems and suggested solutions. It also allows people to note known problems, even if they do not have the answer, as it can trigger suggestions from other members of staff.

*“We encourage everyone to use the Ideas Database for making their ideas known. They can also draw attention to process issues to which they have no solution, which gives others the opportunity to provide an answer. We have a structure behind this that helps with implementing the solution; I read all of the ideas – last month we had at least 30,”* says Ann Lewis.

*“The quick wins we introduce right away. The others may take a little more thought. However, every idea is **look** at, evaluated and either introduced or put on hold while we get the resources in place to enable it to happen or we change systems to allow it to be put in action,”* she adds.

‘Rapid’ is the tool of choice for investigating the more complex ideas. These workshops involve hand picked staff who have relevant skills and knowledge and are therefore more likely to provide a solution.

*“Rapid allows us to get together lots of staff with different grades, but with the most pertinent knowledge to look at the process from end-to-end and come up with the ideas for change,”* says Ann Lewis. *“It is an extremely successful approach that helps get quick and effective solutions.”*

*“For example, we are currently looking at a process that straddles three different departments and we have identified duplication. ‘Rapid’ has enabled us to target this waste and we will remove it from other departments to make sure it gets done once and is done correctly. This also reduces the burden we place on other departments,”* she adds.

The fourth element to the programme for embedding continuous improvement is the Working Together Workshop. These are workshops tailored for all levels of management within the division.

*“Stephen has helped to develop tools for our entire management team, including senior, middle and junior managers. These workshops equip them to think differently and they also develop a division-wide appreciation of what happens in each department. The workshops are an important part of our approach to continuous improvement,”* says Ann Lewis.

So, with improvements, particularly with reducing waste, there have been savings which have been recognised across the division. *“We believe that we are saving money – and that is part of our drive for eliminating waste,”* concludes Ann Lewis.

For further information, please contact:

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