Problem solving and improvement

Scottish Power: Applying Six Sigma

Ben Woodall, Team Manager Correspondence and Yellow Belt
The correspondence department process needed a project because it had been undergoing a lot of change over last couple of years. We'd introduced the new system, the GT7 Scanner workflow, just two years before the project. We'd gone through centralisation just a few years before that, and we're also now taking on a lot more emails, which we didn't used to have before, obviously, as more customers use email as a preferred form of communication. So there have been so many changes in, maybe, three or four years, that it wasn't just a case of, we think there's a problem, we can fix that problem. It was a case of all these different points interacting and we needed to find out where exactly the pain was, then try to eliminate it in that way.

Jackie Cheape, Operations Manager Correspondence and Green Belt
Within the teams there was a lot of conflict because the only measurements that we used were volume related. We didn't have any quality measures.

Vicky Thomson, Team Coach Correspondence and Yellow Belt
So you're really measuring how many pieces of work they are clearing an hour, which doesn't really tell you very much. All it tells you is, that this person cleared ten and that person cleared five. But you don't know if that five was of really high quality and that ten was quite a low quality.

Ross Bern
We were trying to, secondly, reduce any non-value added activity that took place and was a part of the process. So that was things like making sure that we'd reduced the amount of correspondence that had been passed around different parts of the business.

Jackie Cheape
We were aware of the problem with emails. The agent was picking up the email, saw it was an online customer and was forwarding it onto that department, but losing the attachment on the way. And after that you couldn't retrieve it.

Ross Bern
We were also trying to reduce the number of our guaranteed standard failures. This is an obligation we have to ensure we have replied to the customer within five days of receiving their correspondence.

David Simpson, Correspondence Agent
We were working on letters that were on day five, i.e. they had to be responded to today. So there was a certain amount of pressure on everyone.

Jackie Cheape
We were working to a backlog situation constantly. So, if you've got an agent that is working on day five, they know they've got to clear that piece of mail by the afternoon. The pressure becomes huge and they start to make mistakes.

Ben Woodall
You see this stand out. You have your gut instincts. You know there's a problem. What the project did was made it quite clear that it was a problem. You know, gave them some weight to this problem. So it's not just some people moaning. There is actually an issue. We've got the statistics. We can see the clear path and where the process breaks down.

Jackie Cheape
What I have always found is that the black belt gets very involved with the teams, understands the process first before they even look at the project. And for Ross, one of the first things he actually did was to move into the correspondence area, which is quite unusual, I would say, and then began to actually learn the process himself.

Ross Bern
Typically we follow a DEMAIC process. So that is defining what the problem is. Measuring the extent of the problem, analysing to understand what that significant factor is that contributes towards the defect of your processes. Implementing the solutions and then putting robust controls in to make sure that you've got lasting improvement. If the project is of that type of nature then we will appoint a black belt, and the black belt will then produce a project team which will consist of some yellow belts who will typically be operators within the process.

Vicky Thomson
If there were certain things that needed to be done, or needed to be investigated, then I would do the main part of the legwork for that. I would go and do the investigation and find out, and then I would meet up with Ross, or we would have workshop where we were all together and could discuss it as a group.

David Simpson
Myself, or anyone working in the business will say, this is how you could make it better, and these suggestions are taken on board and then if there is a realistic improvement that can be made as a result of making that change, those changes are made.

Jackie Cheape
The solutions that are now in place. The first really quick one we got was the email attachment, and immediately you could see the benefit from that.

Ross Bern
We introduced a performance management framework; whereby agents were able to, for the first time, see how they were performing against the new performance management matrix. We created a new smart scorecard essentially, aligned to individual agent's smart objectives.

Jackie Cheape
The agents actually see it for themselves on a screen. Really, for some it was great, because they're thinking, 'Oh, I'm doing really well!'. For others, it really brought together some coaching needs that the team manager had to quickly put into operation.

Vicky Thomson
I think the agents know that they are being measured more fairly now. So it's not just about the amount of work they clear. It's also about the quality of work that they are clearing.

David Simpson
Have I got a clearer sense of how I'm getting on during the day? Yes, definitely. That helps me, because then I know that I'm doing a good job, but I can see that it is clearly then demonstrated.

Ross Bern
The number of guaranteed standards that we pay out as a consequence of failure within correspondence has reduced by 90%. In addition our backlog position has changed so we are now turning around all correspondence within a two-day period and in some cases we are actually responding to emails that come in on the same day.

Ben Woodall
I think that the DEMEAIC process was very effective in this project because it's so simple and so logical. It's a few simple steps that if you follow it, and do each step correctly, you really can't go wrong.