

Beyond honing

Determination, commitment and the desire to succeed have played their part in Hone-All Precision's transition to a single-source provider of high-quality, fully machined components

Back in 1997 the name Hone-All Precision said it all. But by then the Dunstable-based sub-contractor had already identified that a combination of rising transport costs and increasing pressure to reduce lead times was making the use of other sub-contractors for subsequent machining operations less and less cost effective. So, this 25-employee family-owned business set out to become capable of fully machining components up to 3 m in length in virtually any material to the highest quality standards and within one facility. It now provides a complete manufacturing service, from material procurement through to inspection and delivery of the finished part.

The transition from niche drilling and honing shop to single-source provider did not happen overnight, nor was it accomplished without a substantial investment in capital equipment, staff development and, in conjunction with Cranfield University, the adoption of a Business Excellence Model. But Colin Rodney, founder and managing director of Hone-All Precision (pictured), and co-director Andrea Rodney (pictured), have always been confident that the outcome would benefit both Hone-All Precision and its customers.

"Today our culture is one of continuous improvement, staff empowerment, best practice manufacturing, open communications, partnership and, above all, exceeding our customers' expectations," says Mrs Rodney. "One measure of success is that the drilling and honing part of the business represents less than 30 per cent of turnover, and customers who



previously placed single-operation orders are now benefiting from our additional machining capability." This includes gun drilling, deep hole boring, turning, milling, grinding and EDM drilling, with more than £300,000 having been spent on mills and lathes from, for example, XYZ Machine Tools and Colchester Lathes, as well as a large Boehringer deep hole

borer. To complement this investment, around £100,000 has been spent on a new inspection and quality control facility equipped with a Quantum CNC co-ordinate measuring machine.

BEST PRACTICE MAP

In seeking to drive through its 'best practice in manufacturing' programme,

Hone-All Precision first mapped its entire business process. This prompted a number of changes to the way in which it operates; introducing new scheduling and planning systems, as well as a new order acknowledgement system, and revamping the factory layout to improve the flow of work through the shop. Other initiatives include the adoption of lean manufacturing and kaizen techniques, the implementation of preventative maintenance to avoid unscheduled stoppages, and achieving ISO 9001-2000 accreditation.

In the days when the company was purely a drilling and honing shop, many customers expected jobs to be turned around in three to five days and there was little incentive to invest in a production control system. However, taking on additional machining operations meant that Hone-All Precision would inevitably be dealing with a more complicated and extended manufacturing process, while still seeking to provide customers with regular, clear and timely information relating to the progress of their orders and when they could expect delivery. The answer lay in adapting bespoke software to send an automatic acknowledgement by fax or email to include a firm delivery date when an order is assessed for 'Contract Review'. Should this date not be suitable, customers can request a revised schedule.

Even so, the unexpected can still happen, in which case, says Mrs

Rodney, "we make a point of keeping the customer informed and explaining what can be done to overcome the problem. In the past overdue orders, while not an everyday occurrence, invariably impacted on the amount of urgent or emergency work that could be taken on. However, our new systems have created the reverse effect because we are more efficient at handling current orders and have, therefore, the capacity available to take on more work at short notice."

Apparent to visitors to the 10,000 ft² factory is the open nature of operations. Everyone in the company has been on a 'Finance for Fun' course and management information, including turnover, profit and performance against targets, is shared at monthly meetings. And employees have their say on working conditions. A new dining area and repainting of the machine shop are among the improvements that, as well as raising morale, are good for the company's image. "It is undeniable that prospective customers are impressed by a clean, tidy and safe environment," says Mrs Rodney, "but it is also a major advantage when recruiting."

EXPERIENCE COUNTS

Among recent recruits is Roger Ayers, who last year joined Hone-All Precision at the age of 61 and who, like his younger colleagues, has benefited from the company's enlightened approach to recruitment and training. A highly skilled manual miller, he has since progressed to CNC and, encouraged by the two directors, has also added turning to his skill-set. Enthusiasm and commitment rather than age are top of the list when looking for additional staff, and this reflects the two directors' view that

New sales position set to provide business boost

Ted Barchard, 40, has been appointed by Hone-All Precision to the new role of sales manager. A qualified engineer with several years' experience of deep hole drilling/boring and honing, he will now be promoting the benefits of the company's enhanced machining capability to customers.

industry's criteria for recruiting and retaining people is too often distorted and narrow. "Roger has a wealth of experience that he is willing to pass on to others and he serves as a role model for how a job should be done," says Mr Rodney. This, he adds, is important to a company that accepts responsibility for encouraging young people into engineering and creating opportunities for advancement.

On that note, lean manufacturing and 5S business practices have reduced the amount of 'hands-on' input from senior management, with individuals accepting responsibility and multi-skilling the order of the day. Overall, the impression is of a flexible and approachable business that takes pride in the quality of its work and the commitment of its people to their customers. And this was the theme for Hone-All Precision's participation in last month's Subcon exhibition, which Mr Rodney describes as "having provided an ideal opportunity to welcome existing customers and to introduce our business to people who have yet to put names to faces". And the invitation to do just that remains open.

"No appointment is necessary," says Mrs Rodney. "We are always willing to discuss technical issues and to show people around without any obligation. What you see here is what you get... a business partner driven by the belief that manufacturing in the UK has an exceedingly bright future, because when we put our minds to it we can be the best in the world. Expertise, knowledge, innovation, inventiveness, skills... everything we need is here. All we have to do is to make the most of these assets for businesses like ours to compete and thrive in a global marketplace." **M**

