

Rexam revisits quality package

The European giant of can manufacturing says there is huge untapped value in shop floor quality systems – way beyond quality. Brian Tinham reports on its successes

a shop floor quality system implementation recently completed at packaging giant Rexam's 21 factories across Europe is doing much more than QA. In fact, it's doing everything from automatically generating conformance certificates and production audit trails, to providing operator assistance and information for process improvement and business decision-making.

Rexam produces 50 billion cans per year in what has become a standardised lean manufacturing environment, running high-speed production processes to tight tolerances. Quality control is important in any organisation, but here it has always been paramount – and Rexam's initial issue was that its sheer production volumes and speeds were getting beyond its old QA system. It needed real time monitoring and analysis.

But there was more. Bill Neilson, Rexam's customer and operations quality director, says: "I knew we needed something radically better. We wanted something web-based so that information would be easily available, and it had to be something that people on the shop floor could use. We also wanted something that would work with our other systems, and we wanted intelligence so that what it said would make sense on the shop floor but also in the boardroom."

New wave integration

In fact, Rexam wanted to link to several systems providing data around production statistics and machine information, but also stock trends, maintenance records, staffing levels, material flows and workflow schedules – all to improve visibility of operations. And that included machine monitoring systems, its Minitab Six Sigma systems and its Rexam-wide SAP ERP. It also wanted to standardise procedures, including at plants that had been, and were still being, acquired – with the inevitable mix of different systems.

That's what it has achieved with Lighthouse Systems' Shopfloor Online system – and it's making a fantastic difference. At the plant level, for example, Rexam operates in nine different languages but the screens used by all staff across the sites are virtually identical. "This standard view is so important both within individual plants and across the organisation," says Neilson. "A standard view means we can compare like with like, and identify potential production issues very early. That's critical."

And the benefits are now being felt all the way from the operator level to quality right through to business management. For operators, Lighthouse's systems provide activity prompts, while also saving time on machine checks and in terms of reviewing and analysing problems. For example, since the systems all talk, QA knows when a machine or line is down for whatever reason, tying up loose ends that could otherwise trip up audit trails. Also, reports now have near real-time data, and the system flags issues immediately.

Meanwhile, quality managers save time since reports covering compliance against the quality control plan, quality performance, exceptions, responses and the rest are generated automatically. Also, customer conformance documentation is immediately available.

As for the management team, historical data from the system is now helping to drive plant improvement initiatives, with information linked so that managers and operators can view cause and effect and understand the correlations between, for example, aluminium coil yields, production line practices and materials running. Indeed, Neilson says that since go-live, Shopfloor Online has enabled several plant improvements and significantly reduced customer complaints.

Finally, at group level the benefit is about demonstrating consistency across all plants. The company now has standardised quality control plans and performance benchmarks, while automated audit trails enable it to respond to customer requests much faster. ■

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