

Client: AL Controls
Sector: Laboratory

Key tools or services: Lean Implementation

Requirement

AL Control Laboratories is the largest independent laboratory in the UK, providing a range of solutions for the testing of soil, water, food, oil and air for contaminants or hazardous substances. The company is a global concern, with over 2,000 employees and 30 laboratories servicing 11 European countries.

It was the main UK site at Hawarden in Cheshire which enlisted our help in improving its efficiency and output through the implementation of lean principles – leading to a leaner, fitter operation overall.

Response

Initially we provided support for four of the projects: Anions, Leachates, Semi-Volatile Organic Compounds (SVOC) e.g. water, and Volatile Organic Compounds (VOC).

Our engineers worked with key personnel across all relevant divisions to identify areas where processes could be improved. This was achieved through Value Stream Mapping activities for both the current and future states of the business. Particular emphasis was placed on the value-adding chemistry function versus the storage and movement of large batches of samples, which did not add value.

We also worked with AL Control teams to identify roadblocks to future performance. For example, the high levels of re-testing taking place on one particular process was a fundamental element which would have prevented achievement of turnaround time targets, irrespective of all the other work undertaken.

Using problem-solving tools and techniques, the team devised a very simple and inexpensive way of improving the test method and reducing variability. As a result the test reliability and accuracy was improved.

Another, potentially hazardous, factor identified and addressed by the team was that of samples from customers which compromised sample integrity and accuracy. Taking sub-samples of SVOC (w) and VOC allows the release of volatile compounds and compromises the safety of both people and the environment. The company has now increased the discipline of customers to provide separate samples for volatile tests and has educated its own staff not to take sub-samples.

Result

Our recommendations for the implementation of cellular processes and “single piece flow” have made a dramatic difference, not only to turnaround times, which have improved from 38% to over 90% efficiency, but also to the layout of the laboratory itself.

Now large areas of the building are empty and unused on account of there being less space required for the storage of samples. Instead of processing samples in large batches, a series of “mini” labs

were created, which has meant that lead times have reduced by almost two-thirds – from 12 days to just over 3.5 days.

There was initial concern by AL Controls about how the new layouts would be perceived by customers, however comments have been nothing but positive. Indeed a representative from UKAS said that it was “nice to see it getting back to a proper laboratory.”

Declan Burns, Production Director at ALControls, was delighted with the results and said: “If we had not done this, we would not be here now.” James Dean, RASA Supervisor, added, “picme® really made the effort to understand the processes before making changes.”

To find out how picme® can help you and your business get in touch today:

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picme® really made the effort to understand the processes before making changes.

James Dean, AL Controls

Our collaboration with ALControls demonstrates that engaging employees at all levels and looking at processes in a different way can achieve tremendous results, both in terms of improved efficiency and staff support for sustainable business improvement programmes.

Russell Page, picme®

About us

picme® is one of the UK's most respected business improvement consultancies. We have an impressive pedigree, having originally been set up by the DTI, Chemical Industries Association and several other trade organisations with the specific aim of helping to improve efficiency and competitiveness within the chemical, pharmaceutical, plastics, rubber and polymer industries.

Since then we have expanded our areas of expertise and are now the partner of choice for many of the country's leading organisations. We specialise in delivering world-class, sustainable business improvement to companies of all sizes, with emphasis on the development and up-skilling of the workforce as a whole.

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