

**Client:** MEL Chemicals  
**Sector:** Chemical Manufacture

**Key tools or services:** Business Improvement Techniques training

### Requirement

MEL Chemicals in Swinton, Manchester, pioneered the development of zirconium chemistry 60 years ago. Today, the company is the world's leading manufacturer of zirconium chemicals and oxides, used in catalysts, sorbents, paper coatings, ceramics and fuel cells. Part of the international Luxfer Group, MEL Chemicals employs around 150 people at the Swinton site.

Like many other process companies, MEL Chemicals faces pressures on many fronts, including fluctuating currency rates, rising raw material and utility costs, and competition from low-cost economies - requiring a continuous focus on plant productivity improvements.

The company worked with picme® on a front-end plant improvement project linked to Business Improvement Techniques (BIT) NVQs. Three project objectives were set out on day one:

- > To bring about the changes needed to remain competitive in a global economy
- > To develop continuous improvement skills
- > To restore historical yields to the front-end processes

### Response

The project team consisted of 13 staff with 191 years of MEL experience between them, including a fitter, shift team leader, analytical chemist, chemical engineer, production manager and planner.

The team's first task was to gather and analyse data about the front-end processes. Through masterclasses (structured workshops) facilitated by picme®, they calculated actual yield losses, identified the key reasons and developed action plans to fix the problems. For example, after

investigation, it was discovered that high solid losses in the filtrate from a filter press could be reduced by making a software change to capture more fines at the beginning of the press fill stage and by reducing the batch size slightly to reduce end-cycle losses.

The first picme® masterclass enabled the team to improve process yield in the first-stage synthesis process which provides commodity feedstock for downstream speciality products. The second masterclass focused on increasing product output from the downstream speciality plant.

Steve Simister, MEL Chemicals' Training Manager has himself successfully completed BIT NVQ level 3.

### Result

- > Over £400K in yield improvements over 2 years
- > This is 33% higher than the initial target
- > Throughput of key product lines has doubled

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**Team members were carefully chosen for their blend of skills and experience, and – most importantly – their readiness to speak out, challenge assumptions and make a positive impact on business performance.**

Dave Phelan, Operations Manager, MEL Chemicals

**For me the real value of BIT NVQs is that they make you analyse and clarify the overall improvement process by building a portfolio of evidence in tandem with training. My recommendation to other companies would be to start the qualification a month or two into the process so that you're gathering evidence while events are unfolding.**

Steve Simister, Training Manager, MEL Chemicals

## 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.

## Clients we are proud to work with

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