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Sustainable Business Performance

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Workers choose project to cut own jobs and energy use as well!

In a huge demonstration of trust in the integrity of their employers a Quality Circle of Moulders in a Pottery carried out a project which they knew would cut seven of their nine jobs.

The task of Moulders is to create hardened clay moulds of the undersides of objects such as plates and saucers as shown in the diagram below. These moulds must be porous so that when suction is applied from below, the wet clay moulding will not fly off when the rubber wheel descends to press the shape into the mould and to form the upper face.

The moulders had noticed that these moulds which they created had an extremely variable useful life ranging from about 30 or so impressions to sometimes more than 150 before surface finish broke down and affected the quality of the product. They decided to investigate this. The most popular theory was

that the moisture content in the mould before it was itself fired was the main reason for differences in the type of porosity. Some moulds had very fine porous structure and other course. It was the course ones which broke down first and therefore had the shortest life. When they tested that theory by making a number of moulds with varying moisture content, they found that it made no difference.

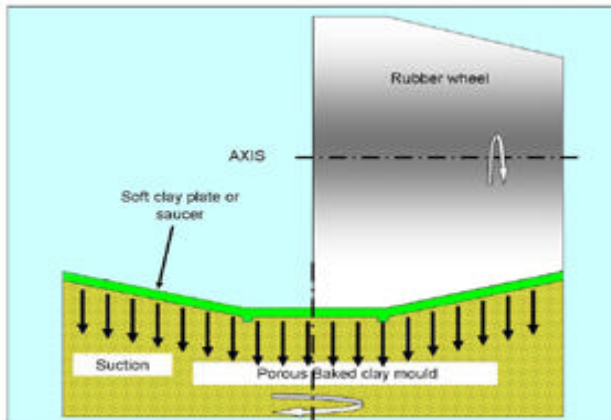
Further trials found that the main difference was the rate of heat transfer whilst the moulds were being fired in the oven. The more rapid the heat transfer, the finer the pore structure. They decided that the best way to influence this was to make the moulds thinner. Not only did this enable more moulds to be fired at the same time, it cut the energy requirement substantially as well. It also showed that all of the moulds made this way resulted in between 150 and 200 impressions before requiring replacement. This was a huge reduction in the number of moulds required and meant that instead of 9 moulders, the department only required 2!

However, before the team presented the project to management there was a delay. Whilst management knew of the project they did not know why they had not presented it. Later they discovered that the team had held meetings with their Union to consider the implications.

When they then presented the project with the Union represented, they asked if the displaced members of the team could be re-employed in other departments of their choice where they knew vacancies to exist.

Management immediately agreed and the project was implemented with great satisfaction for all.

Next edition —the case of a team of workers faced with redundancy redesigning a company product with huge increase in market share!



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