Case Study 7

Unilever HPCE – the self-assessment journey

Introduction

This case study describes the Unilever business, Home and Personal Care – Europe (HPCE) self-assessment journey from when it was formed in 1996, when it set itself the aim of being 'world class' in the new millennium. In this case study we cover a six-year period up until 2001 and give some indication of Unilever's plans from 2002 and beyond.

Over 100 years ago, the founder, William Hesketh Lever, stated the following mission for his soap company:

- To make cleanliness commonplace.
- To lessen work for women.
- To foster health and contribute to personal attractiveness, that life may be more enjoyable and rewarding for the people who use our products.

Unilever's mission today is not fundamentally different but better reflects the social and economic climate and the wider scope of its operations.

The HPCE Business Group was established in 1996 as one of the 12 Unilever Business Groups with its headquarters in Brussels, Belgium. At that time HPCE comprised 15 local companies in 18 European countries, although these numbers have increased over recent years. Within Europe there are 18 factories and eight innovation centers. Unilever HPCE has 10 000 employees, of whom 1600 are managers.

HPCE's first president was John Sharpe, who had been an active supporter of both total quality management and later business excellence in his previous senior roles in other Unilever companies in the UK – Birds Eye Wall's (frozen foods) and Elida Fabergé (personal products). The latter was one of the two businesses that became part of HPCE.