



'The Golden Bay' Project

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October 20, 2020

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MAIN MESSAGE: With an increase of the average age of their employees, a cargo division of an airline company redesigned a part of the operation into “The Golden Bay”. A workplace where the older employee can work healthy and be of added value until retirement.

PROBLEM: The older employees could not keep up with the demands of productivity. Because of that, the quality of the delivered products is not good enough, which can cause unsafe situations during work, transportation to the planes and in the plane during flying. The employees experience the (physical) work, the working environment and the working conditions (f.e. nightshift) as very heavy. They say that they need more time to recover than in their younger years and having physical complaints (knees, back, shoulders).

CONTEXT: The employees of the department are 99% men with an average age of 56. They work in three shifts over 7 days as builders. Their tasks are building pallets by carrying and lifting boxes or bags on to the pallet (mostly by hand) and administration on pc or handheld (standing or sitting in a forklift). The operation floor is divided into 10 areas called bays. Each bay has its own work package.

Actions: After reading an article about how BMW is managing the effects of their aging population the manager of the division asked a small project team of 4 employees, a planner, a team lead and an ergonomist to start ‘The Golden Bay’ project. I had next to the expert role (ergonomist) also the role of facilitator (Participatory Ergonomics). During the first session the project team determined the goal; ‘How can we design a work area *and* working conditions within a cargo division of an airline company where employees can work safe, healthy, with pleasure and feeling respected until retirement (71) while delivering qualitative products in time’. Then the project team started analyzing the problem and gained information about the older employee in relation with (physical) work. A list of topics (workplace, way of working and the employee) and their bottlenecks and requirements was made. Because just one of the bays of the department would become ‘The Golden Bay’, the project team chose a bay (area) they thought was the best because of the location (in the heart of the operation) and the more difficult work package. *‘Maybe we are older, but we are experienced and want to be of added value.’* The next sessions the project team worked on finding solutions (creative problem solving), dividing the tasks and sharing updates and progress. Between the sessions, ‘The Golden Bay’ was redesigned directly.

OUTCOMES: In the beginning of the project, there was a lot of resistance by the employees in the project team. *“We are not old; we don’t want to be tucked away in a corner for elderly.”* Besides that, there were the negative comments from the colleagues. However, by writing down the project goal together and acknowledging their concerns and feelings (especially by the manager), their resistance changed slowly. The project became not a plan of the manager anymore, but a project the team members believe in. Because the changes of the workplace were directly visible, the attitude of the colleagues changed positively. They became curious and want to be part of ‘The Golden Bay’ team also.

The most important changes made during the project in the workplace were a new painted floor, new computer desks with larger screens, better lighting and new adjustable chairs in the forklifts. For the way of working the employees of ‘The Golden Bay’ do not have nightshifts anymore, they start the early shift an hour later and work in dedicated teams with a predictable, but more complicated work package. Despite of the small team of employees a decreased absenteeism and higher productivity was seen.

DISCUSSION: After 4 months, an evaluation was held. Not working the night shift anymore and start the early shift an hour later made the employees feel less tired. They said they sleep better. Although this positive experience, not all the employees wanted to stay in 'The Golden Bay'. They rather choose money for working nightshifts over health.

Working in dedicated teams made the employees feel more appreciated and responsible. You have to accomplish the tasks together instead of coming to work and not knowing which bay, which work package and with whom. An additional benefit of a dedicated team, a dedicated bay and with a list of way of working rules was a daily clean and tidy workplace.

What made this project a success, besides winning the innovation award within the company? The involvement of the manager. Every session he was present, he listened and encouraged the employees. They felt taken seriously and heard.

Looking back the project team changed a lot, but most of all fast and easy achievable solutions. The physical workload in the bay is still high. Reducing the physical workload is only possible when the bay is redesigned drastically by introducing automation or robots.

CONCLUSION: It would be interesting for other departments or organizations to start a similar project use the positive findings and try to improve and learn from the experiences of 'The Golden Bay' project.

REFERENCES:

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