



EU FUNDING SUCCESS HAS GIVEN THE LESLIE GROUP A COMPETITIVE EDGE

The result was transformation of the way the companies in the group communicate with each other - in fact, it has changed the whole culture of the business

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The Leslie Group Ltd, a privately owned manufacturing company, relocated to Birmingham and embarked on a strategy of expansion through acquisition in the mid 1990s. Management underwent a period of enormous cultural and organisational change as a result. Their MD, David Brooks, had already investigated one European research project - designed to make advanced manufacturing technologies available to smaller companies - and briefly became involved in a project focused on methodologies for selecting IT applications. This only served to highlight the shortcomings of the company's existing IT infrastructure and the need to make improvements in this area. Then David heard about a new consortium being put together for a project called WIDEBEAM.

With 50% of the cost being provided by the EC, WIDEBEAM enabled fifteen partners from UK, Spain and Bulgaria to trial a range of IT applications, supported by experts with experience of this kind of technology transfer. It provided a way of exploring the capabilities and limitations of a range of technologies that could be used within the manufacturing supply chain and obliged them to freely publish the results of their work for the benefit of other organisations.

From Leslie's point of view, two of the most positive outcomes have been the installation of video-conferencing facilities between its two manufacturing sites and development of a corporate intranet.

The intranet has transformed internal reporting and information sharing between management teams. Other experiments, such as the introduction of document management and workflow systems, may have been less successful in the short term, but could not have been considered without the support from WIDEBEAM (and may well be revisited as the company's use of technology evolves).

Although not all aspects of the project were immediately successful, David feels that the investment in technology and manpower (the equivalent of a full-time person) necessary for participation in WIDEBEAM was fully justified. *"We would not be at our current stage of development without the project;"* he says, *"it was a critical step in our evolution."*



The LESLIE Group was faced with the need to integrate the cultures and practices of the business it had acquired.

The simple step of adopting a group-wide email system, for example, has been a major catalyst for change, selling the benefits of IT to more traditionally-minded managers within the group of companies.

By focusing on the transfer of technology skills into the group and stimulating acceptance of the technologies by demonstrating benefit in day-to-day operations, Leslie has gained a genuine competitive edge.

They have overcome organisational development issues, making systems more consistent and maintainable, given management more day-to-day thinking time and gained greater flexibility in working with external partners.

David's advice to smaller companies looking to participate in collaborative research projects is threefold. Exercise patience in the face of bureaucracy, accept the entry-cost in terms of the time it takes to set up a project and, above all, recognise the value of the indirect benefits such as networking and seeing life through others' eyes.