



Customer Testimonial

Enterprise Manufacturing Solution



“ without WorkPool the business would have ceased to exist! ”

Christian Walsler
Operations Manager
(Employed 2001 – 2015)

Manufacturing

First African Holdings is one of the largest sign manufacturers and cladding suppliers in Africa, with particular expertise in the retail environment, financial services sector and oil industry.



Why do you use WorkPool?

WorkPool runs our business. All aspects of production are managed by WorkPool, including the dispatch department, procurement, stores and the entire factory floor. WorkPool also runs the design department, quotations and sales. The only thing we don't run through WorkPool is our financial system; however even in the financial department WorkPool drives the actions around orders, payments and so on.

WorkPool provides me with a platform that allows people to perform and succeed. It generates structure, brings about transparency, visibility around actions and ensures people are accountable and responsible. I know that if I do my bit on WorkPool there won't be any surprises, and I hate surprises. It saves me time and I know my guys are busy and effective while being focussed on the right things. We also use WorkPool as our customer and project database and to manage certifications and maintenance schedules.

Why did you decide on WorkPool?

In 2010/11, like most companies at the time, our business was under major pressure due to economic and environmental factors. We had just had a very bad year where we made a big loss. There was no budget and most of our best people had left. We needed something to change things around. We asked and phoned around and we all thought that we would need an ERP system to help us which we could not afford. I heard about WorkPool from a family member and checked it out. I was mightily impressed and could see how it would work in our own environment. I pulled the financial manager and business owner into the discussion and they said that if I was brave enough to tackle it they would support me. We knew we needed something like this and WorkPool was affordable, so that is where it started. It was a big risk for me, but it paid off. In 2010 we made a big loss, so for all intents and purposes we had closed down. We implemented WorkPool early in 2011 and increased our turnover by about R7 million that same year, pretty much breaking even. In 2012 we were able to almost double our turnover, growing by about 90% in one year! We stagnated at about that level between 2013 and 2014 not because of production issues but because sales did not keep up. We also doubled in size from about 35 staff to 80 staff.

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What happened when you started using WorkPool?

We started by adding all the staff except the people in the factory. The first thing that happened was that everything got structured. Something simple like one person asking another to do something was now done in a structured way, and it wasn't all over the show. There was one place for everything and it was visible to everyone. This way of working was new to us so we started by using manual tasks only, processes weren't even on the map for us yet. Just plain tasks with clear instructions. This alone had an immediate and massive positive impact that delivered incredible results within the first month.

The second month was off the scale! Each person simply started doing what they were asked and things started flowing better. People love ticking off lists of things they have done. Immediately we had structure, where before we had to rely on email and spreadsheets and project plans. The only way you could make sure someone do something was to CC that person's manager. This created a lot of unnecessary emails and communication which is very tiring. WorkPool took out the finger pointing because the rule was simple – everything must be on WorkPool. We could take out all the subjectivity and work with objective information. This removed an immeasurable amount of conflict. That was just the initial gain.

Once everyone was connected we could start focusing on specific issues and improvements. At that point I was issuing manual tasks all the time to drive procurement, dispatch and production, which is pretty much how we worked on WorkPool for the first 2 years. I was looking for a way to do things even better so pulled in the WorkPool guys. They showed me what they were doing in their own environment and how they were keeping track of things, using dashboards and automating actions with processes. I started with a few simple processes. The first one I wrote was a leave application, just to get the paper out of the way. In the past a leave application could take 2 months to travel through the system, because you sign it, the manager signs it, then the managing director must sign it and then it goes to finance to process and file it. I also built an expense claim process which allowed people to complete the claim process in 2 days and the money was in their account. These processes worked wonderfully as incentives and a selling point to get the people to use WorkPool and processes. You just start the process and things happen.

How did you manage the transition from the old to the new?

People hate change, especially engineers. If the management team or leaders in the company do not support you and do not lead by example it makes your job very difficult. Sometimes you have to force change. I was allowed to force things and make changes because I was accountable to deliver results and we knew we had to change our ways.

My goal was to make WorkPool part of peoples' habits, their routine. If you can achieve that then you reach a point where you can say with certainty, like when you sit in front of a client, that if I log this task now it will happen. This type of predictability can only come about when there is discipline. Of course the biggest challenge is that most people don't have that type of discipline. So when I saw what the WorkPool guys were doing I could take the idea of a dashboard and combine it with processes to make activities visible to everyone and predetermine the "pipe" that work goes down as long as I could get the process to start. There are so many variables to consider in a production line like ours and I really pushed the WorkPool process engine to its limit to deal with all our variables. I had to build in flexibility and find ways to measure, monitor and report on things. We were able to push all this information to a dashboard and make it visible to everyone which is something we were never able to do before, i.e. making risks visual to everyone.

There was no hiding and everyone had to work together. A guy could push an escalate button in WorkPool to report a problem and a red triangle would pop up next to a task that is visible on all the screens in our factory including the tea room. The boss can walk by at any time, spot a problem and start asking questions, so things just happened. It worked. The culture changed. Things were visible and people could step in to help when they had to. This took a lot of the emotionality out of it when things went wrong or there was a miscommunication, because you could always refer back to WorkPool to see what is happening or why there is a delay.

As we grew we did not have to employ new managers. I always looked for a technological solution first before employing more people. I would rather push WorkPool to do what I wanted than employ more people because I could be sure that the system would do the same thing correctly over and over.

How did WorkPool help to train and empower staff?

WorkPool creates a platform for people to perform and it excites me when people perform. Their performance is my reward.

One of my biggest problems was dispatch. Everyone gave the dispatch guy grief and complained that everything was wrong, yet I knew I had a good, capable guy there. So when I met with him to discuss his performance we looked at opportunities for growth and improvement. I told him that to grow he would have to stop being a dispatch clerk and start being a dispatch manager. He didn't have the qualification for this but he had the potential and was willing to put in the extra effort to prove himself, so he took up the challenge.

We set up a process to ensure people send through proper instructions and supporting information when they submit requests, e.g. a packing list, the dispatch date, expected date to be delivered, the budget, the contact person and so on. This ensured that when he received an instruction he had all the information he needed and, if anything was missing, he could escalate it back without consequence or negativity to senior staff. This approach also works well with introverts who don't like confrontation. You can have a manager shout at and blame a lower level staff member when they are actually the one who gave a bad instruction or made assumptions. Consider that a site could have 2000 individual parts and he is expected to get all 2000 correct - or there could be a problem. If the document says 100 rivets then he was only allowed to put in 100 rivets, yet the worker on site may need 102 rivets and now cannot complete the job because he is missing 2 rivets and the nearest shop is 500km away. We gave him more freedom to anticipate these types of things and make decisions based on his experience and common sense. He performed well and based on his success was promoted within 6 months from an hourly to monthly employee, received a substantial raise and other benefits. I loved it; the guy didn't have the qualification but he had the ability and he proved himself.

We also had screens put up on the factory floor so that people could see what was going on. We encouraged them to look at the big picture and make smart decisions. An operator could see the list of priorities in terms of all the projects and respective delivery dates. So he could look at his list and see that number 3 in his queue was the same as or similar to number 10. If he did number 10 after number 3 he could save time in set up and material which we would otherwise be thrown away.

Something else we did was to create a platform for people to report and own up to their mistakes in a constructive way. We called it a "celebration of learning" report. We all make mistakes, but we need to learn from them and prevent them from happening again. So by recording the mistakes they became traceable and we could take away the finger pointing and use mistakes as an opportunity to improve what we were doing and prevent it from happening again. We could incorporate all these lessons and our years of experience into our processes to manage these risks effectively which was of immeasurable value.

How did WorkPool improve your customer service?

We make use of WorkPool's directory as our primary customer database. We created a view (form) for each customer that contained all their contact details as well as site specific information, documents and reports. We store photos on the views that we collect as part of the site surveys as well as "before" and "after" photos, copies of the site register with all the checks/inspections, etc. So if a customer phones to report damage to a site, anyone can go onto the directory, open his view and open the photos all while he is on the phone. If the customer says "Someone crashed into the pole" I can comment "But there is a wall in front?" and he would say "Yes, he drove through that" or "No, there is no wall ..." which meant we were looking at the wrong site but with the same name. With WorkPool we have an immediate, visual tool to help the guy on our call centre identify the issues quickly and correctly. This general visibility and transparency of information along with the call centre functionality gives us the ability to provide clients with accurate and real time feedback. Each client or project has an electronic folder that contains all the tasks, documents and email communications relating to it.

All this information is searchable and we can also report on this. Information in our database can also be used in our processes or inversely processes can automatically update information in our database as the people do their work. This reduces administration and ensures information is updated immediately. We could even set up WorkPool to allow some customers to log in from time to time and access their own information on WorkPool without us being involved.

How does WorkPool help you to manage compliance and certifications?

People would prepare for weeks in advance for their ISO certification. I never had to prepare. I would ask the ISO guys what they need and I would just show them where to find it in WorkPool. At our third review we were already so advanced that I believe we were beyond what the ISO guys could understand or map to their templates and we had to break things down for them.

We track everything with WorkPool that has to do with certification, legislation and industry standards like safety standards. All our instruments and machines have to be certified, which we manage with something as simple as a recurring task. We used to have a stack of manuals and paper with lots of certificates and instructions indicating the period and requirements for each one and we dropped the ball on this from time to time. Instead of loading everything at once we created tasks as old certificates expired or maintenance was due until everything we needed to adhere to was set up on WorkPool. We did it once and it was done. Today people do work without even knowing they are following these rules and schedules. They get a task, they check the instructions or a link to the last time we did something and do it again. We even manage legal matters like BEE registrations where we have to start 4 months in advance to get things done on time. We also load recurring tasks against customers to remind us of our own obligations like maintenance, periodical site visits or any other service commitments. We don't drop the ball on any of these.

WorkPool versus ERP Solutions?

Based on the tremendous growth we had with WorkPool in the first 2 to 3 years I thought that we may be pushing WorkPool to its limits and that we may now need to change over to a bigger system. We looked at systems used in bigger factories as we thought ERP would be the logical next step for us and everyone was putting emphasis on "resource planning". If you build something like a car you typically do the same thing again and again on the manufacturing line, so you can keep things simple and predict to a large extent how things will go and therefore plan your resources and your machines accordingly. Our requirements are different. Our products and the variables around them are typically unique and a process starts before a project gets into the factory and continues beyond manufacturing to delivery, assembly and maintenance. Every time we tried to do resource planning and match exactly what was going on it was a futile exercise. We just wasted time going around the block 70 times when every time it came back to WorkPool as the solution because I could see what was going on. Sure, maybe we did put in a bit more time adding more information into WorkPool because the process we used was cumbersome. But it worked and allowed us to follow unique routes through the factory as far as I could predict them. Also, for us, high level resource planning is good enough. I can do my forecast saying I need X number of people to do this, I have Y number in the factory, what are we busy with, when will it be done by, so "Yes, let's do the job we have the capacity". You could see that production was running fine and if targets were not being met it was not because of a production issue.

Some of the ERP solutions we looked at had amazing reports and pretty interfaces. WorkPool's interface is quite dated so it can put some people off because it isn't as nice as the newer apps. But we chose to rather work with the WorkPool guys as they are always willing and flexible to change, unlike many of the established software vendors who won't change their software to fit in with you. Also, WorkPool was always cheap and you cannot get over that hurdle with other companies. It was important that we could control our own processes and make changes ourselves. In many cases with ERP solutions you are dependent on the software vendor to help you which can be expensive and time consuming. By the time the requirements have been documented in enough detail, the system configured and passed through quality assurance, things could have changed again. We would either have to contract people to do this or obtain the skills internally so we do it ourselves, like we do on WorkPool.

Lastly, I want a single system that can run the entire business, not just manufacturing. We did not want to have a separate CRM system, separate email system, etc. We wanted everyone and all departments to be connected. I could not find any other system brave enough to tackle and integrate email like WorkPool and I looked everywhere. The only solution I have seen to date that actually allows you to operate completely without paper is WorkPool. Our financial department never really embraced WorkPool, but you will never really get away from having a financial system like Pastel or Omnix. Fortunately you can still drive their actions through WorkPool.

Would you recommend WorkPool?

I recently moved to a new company and the first thing I did was to get WorkPool. As I look back to what we did with WorkPool over the last 4 years I can honestly say that without WorkPool the business would have ceased to exist. As far as return on investment - pick a number, any number - the business would not have existed anymore. We would not have reached the turnover we did and we would have lost clients. Before me we had about 6 or 7 production managers and not one of them could cope with the variety and different styles, shapes, etc. we had to deal with. No two of our projects are the same. As someone who was there before and after I know the only differentiator was that I had WorkPool to help me cope.

