

'YOUR Challenge' is in India

It's not everyday that working on a sustainability project can lead to a life changing experience in one of the poorest parts of the world, but that is exactly what happened to Marina Turion-Kahlmann, of Akzo Nobel Aerospace Coatings, and a team of Dutch employees from the Sassenheim site.



Marina Turion-Kahlmann (fifth from left) with her Indian and AkzoNobel colleagues

Marina was part of a five-strong, cross-functional team, with representatives from Car Refinishes, Decorative Coatings and Aerospace Coatings, who worked on a CSR business project called 'YOUR Challenge'. This was initiated by 'YOUR AkzoNobel', an organisation designed to integrate and develop people who have been with the company for less than 5 years.

Marina's team submitted a feasibility study on the recycling of paint waste into a valuable resource in the Netherlands. "We wanted to see if something useful could be created out of paint waste," Marina told Intercom. "Waste from left over paint amounts to 5.4 million litres annually in the Netherlands. This waste is normally incinerated, which has an environmental impact with CO₂ emissions."

"We received a great overview of Indian culture and undertook interesting but difficult role plays to help us deal with cultural differences."

The study focused on two areas; the recycling of solvents and sludge at industrial locations, and the recycling of consumer waste in left-over tins.

"In principle, solvents can be separated from other components by distillation and recycled as commercial reducers or cleaning liquid. The remaining residue after distillation, called sludge, can be removed as waste but at a much lower volume, thus meaning less waste to destroy. This sludge can potentially be re-used as a low segment undercoat, having an even bigger environmental and economic impact."

The team also looked at the possibility of a consumer paint recycling system. "We discovered that a Canadian company was already doing this, providing containers for the recycling of left over tins similar to those used to recycle glass and paper. We set about translating this process to the Dutch situation."

The 'YOUR Challenge' judges viewed this as the best CSR entry and the team's prize was to spend two weeks on an exchange programme in one of the poorest areas of India. This was

organised by "Share People", an organisation which takes professional individuals to developing countries to support local companies to improve the likelihood of their communities by sharing knowledge.

Before flying out to New Dehli, the team underwent a comprehensive briefing to help them cope with the challenges ahead. "We received a great overview of Indian culture and undertook interesting but difficult role plays to help us deal with cultural differences", said Marina.

Upon arrival the first challenge was to undertake a team assignment. "This involved walking the streets of New Dehli and interviewing random people about 'life and death in India'," explained Marina. "This was incredibly challenging but the Indian people were very open. They were fascinated by us and were particularly intrigued to find out that our next destination was Orissa."

With the assignment complete the team travelled to Baliguda, in Orissa, the poorest pocket of the poorest state in India. "Seventy eight percent of people live below the poverty line and nothing can prepare you for the level of poverty we saw here", said Marina. "It was extremely difficult to comprehend that people were actually living on \$2 a day; it makes you really appreciate what you have in life".

"Leaf plants are a rare natural resource. The locals dry the leaves and weave them into ecological plates, similar to our paper plates"

Living conditions for the team were very basic; bed, toilet and shower – but deemed luxurious by the locals.

In Baliguda, the team met their project representatives from Pradan, an organisation which establishes co-operatives to improve local livelihoods in poor regions of India. When the locals are ready to take over the work Pradan leave and create new co-operatives in different areas.



Marina (standing) partnered with the local Indian people to improve their business processes.

“Our project was to work closely with a leaf plant manufacturer to improve their business process,” continued Marina. “Leaf plants are a rare natural resource. The locals dry the leaves and weave them into ecological plates, similar to our paper plates.”

Taking on the role of consultants, the team partnered with the leaf manufacturers and introduced Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunity and Threats (SWOT) analysis and business plans to help them set priorities and open doors to achieving better results.

“Knowledge sharing was a key benefit”, said Marina. “As a group we analysed the entire supply chain to see what could be improved. We found that of the 36 types of plate being manufactured 98% of sales were generated by only three. This led to training of the plate makers to discuss requirements with their customers to find out exactly what type of plate they wanted and suggesting alternatives when a particular size wasn’t in stock.”

“Working on the project also helped me to think outside of the box and improved my leadership skills, particularly around adapting to changing circumstances.”

“It also makes you appreciate what you’ve got. Despite enormous poverty the people are proud and living very fulfilled lives. I was homesick, missed my husband terribly and was also ill, but these things teach you to keep going.

“It was also a voyage of friendship and reciprocity. A team of people from very different walks of life were put together for this journey; that’s a challenge in itself and we came through it with a deep-seated sense of respect and friendship for each other. We all came back stronger and much more mature.”



So how does Marina sum up the experience? “It was amazing and enriching, and really pushed me out of my comfort zone,” she said. “It made me realise that I was able to cope with much more than I thought possible. I am a lot calmer now and the experience has enabled me to put things into perspective; I don’t get stressed over the little things anymore.

“Working on the project also helped me to think outside of the box and improved my leadership skills, particularly around adapting to changing circumstances. This definitely helps me in my day-to-day activities in AkzoNobel.”

The final part of the exchange programme saw representatives from Pradan in India visit the Netherlands in June to learn about agricultural techniques.