

Flour power

CIPS PURCHASING AND SUPPLY PROFESSIONAL OF THE YEAR - Sebastian Hernandez, RHM

Sebastien Hernandez displayed drive and determination in setting up a centralised purchasing team for RHM. And he didn't stop there, as Emma Clarke discovers

When he joined food group RHM as head of procurement for the Customer Solution Division, Sebastien Hernandez found purchasing was either limited or non-existent. And, each of the division's nine units, working across 19 different sites, had its own culture, brands, products and processes.

Within 14 months, he established a centralised purchasing team that has delivered considerable cost savings. Dealing with issues including staff development, corporate social responsibility and supplier relations, as well as improving the division's use of technology, Hernandez impressed judges with his "drive and determination" and "excellent ability to motivate".

He has also established a new structure of professional procurement specialists. In the past, each of the Customer Solution Division's units had its own buyers responsible for ingredients, but in the new structure lead buyers purchase commodities for the whole organisation. Site procurement managers then implement the deals set up by the lead buyers and manage supplier relationships.

The challenge, says Hernandez, was to set up these specialists across the units and manage them remotely. This fitted with the group's drive towards centralised purchasing, but Hernandez went a step further by making buyers responsible for portfolios of commodities, including dairy, protein and eggs. "By focusing people on bigger spend and top strategic products you create a centre of expertise excellence around a portfolio."

Key to success was setting out a clear vision. This came in the form of a three-stage strategy and began with tactical alignment, or "going back to basics" to get stakeholder buy-in and ensure staff were given roles most suitable to their skills. Then came strategic alignment or "getting the tools in place" to help teams deliver. This included skills development, succession planning and implementation of IT such as a spend data management system. This was done in only seven months and the team is now working on process improvement.

He believes procurement now has a better focus on the urgency of delivery and ownership of targets. He is now working on improving RHM's approach to CSR.

Hernandez was born in the Loire Valley region of France. He began his purchasing career with American Express in 1997 while completing a masters degree in purchasing and supply from ESSEC, a French business school. He came to the UK and in 2002 he set up Amex's first marketing procurement team.

When Hernandez was headhunted by RHM in 2004, he was also offered the post of director of procurement at Amex in the US. He chose RHM. "It gave me the opportunity to put a proper strategy in place and to reorganise and rationalise all portfolios."

After only eight years in the profession, Hernandez has already proved himself a leader. "What helped was that I knew what the endgame was - I saw it at the end of the tunnel and I went for it." Working for two companies that believe in staff development has also helped, and he is keen to emphasise team development as vital to success.

Hernandez was recently promoted to procurement and logistics director for the Cake and Customer Partnerships Division and looks after a 36-strong team. "I miss the negotiations with suppliers and the contact I had with the team, but I am looking forward to learning more about how to run a business."

Hernandez, the judges said, "would be an asset to any organisation and is clearly valued at RHM". The profession will be glad to hear, therefore, it is at no risk of losing him yet, as he has applied for permanent UK residence. Why? "I like the British way of working," he said.