

Sweden's take on lean



Joakim Hillberg, co-owner of Revere AB and

chairman of the Swedish Lean Forum, has worked with lean in and out of Sweden for over 20 years, supporting companies and organisations in their implementation efforts. He shares his thoughts on the advancement of lean in the Scandinavian country.

At the last annual Swedish Lean Forum conference, in October 2011, there were over 500 participants from different types of industrial companies but also from schools, hospitals, government agencies, police, software companies, finance, travel companies, media, universities. Probably from most sectors of Swedish society. This is quite unbelievable considering how lean started in Sweden.

Some of the earliest efforts with lean thinking in Sweden were in the 1980s. One of Shingo's books was translated and there were efforts on using kanban, but the main area of focus was "just" reduction of tied-up capital. In the 1990s, two important companies engaged in a much more focused effort to change their production systems; these companies were SAAB and truck company Scania. SAAB might not currently be a role model, but without its work with lean the company would have probably disappeared much earlier: it had many Japanese senseis coaching and training people

in the business, which became, in retrospective, a centre for developing Swedish lean competences. Scania already identified its need for change in the 1990s and more or less made a carbon copy of the Toyota House.

But it wasn't until after 2000 that lean started to get wider recognition in Sweden. It was then that Lean Forum was started as a non-profit organisation with the aim to spread lean thinking. It was a quite small industrial club at the beginning, but it has grown into a 5,000-strong network of members from very different areas.

Just to give you an idea of the dramatic expansion of lean in the country, there are currently more than a hundred annual open lean events or seminars in Sweden. And these are not just for industry: more than 80% of health care organisations and more than 30% of municipalities in the country are now working with lean in some way.

Additionally, in the last few years two important national initiatives have been started:

- The Production Leap, a national support programme for sustainable lean development in small and medium sized industrial companies. So far, the initiative has seen more than 10,000 people attending seminars, 1,000 people going through a 10-day training university course in lean (whilst going to work at the same time) and coaching offered to over 100 companies implementing lean. As an effect of this course, there are now at least ten universities in Sweden offering some sort of executive course in lean.
- Verksamhetslyftet, a training programme for the public sector founded in 2009. Its purpose is to support the development of lean in municipalities and healthcare. The programme has so far given more than 1,000 people a basic training in lean, which has resulted in a large number of implementation initiatives.

Research is also growing, with the launch just recently of a national lean research network. A simple example of the effectiveness of this initiative is the number of student dissertations on lean, which has increased from a couple per year to over 50 per year over the last decade.

The literature base is expanding: at the beginning there merely were some translations from Japanese or English, but today there are around 30 books in Swedish, with about half of them written in the country. This is quite impressive in a country with a population of 9 million, especially considering that most people are fluent in English.

The Swedish lean journey is in many ways similar to that experienced in other countries. It was very tool-based at first, with a strong focus on 5S, SMED, etc. and has recently become more focused on strategy and work with lean principles. There are some differences, however: the use of Kaizen Blitz and Kaizen events is not prevalent at all in Sweden. They only appear in global companies where it is mandatory.

This can probably be attributed to Sweden being a collective society: for example, most Swedes attend kindergarten early on, when they are 1- or 2-years-old, and there they are already taught to co-operate. Using the Toyota House as a model for describing lean and an organisation's production system is also very common, due to Scania's early work.

Looking briefly at the future of lean in Sweden, the methodology will continue to evolve becoming increasingly perceived as an enterprise-wide system. The respect for people principle is also expected to gain momentum. There is an increased understanding of the fact that, if you want to reap the full benefits of a learning organisation, there have to be gains for all parties. Furthermore, there is a need for more research to be published, to expand the evidence and knowledge base on lean.