

First APO mission to Sweden

Sixteen participants from 13 APO member countries attended the first APO study mission to Sweden, 5–9 December 2005. The mission topic was Quality and Innovation in Sweden, hosted by the Göteborg University School of Business, Economics and Law. During the five days, participants heard many presentations from quality practitioners and academics who explained how the Göteborg region, using entrepreneurship and innovation, was able to rise from the ashes after its leading shipbuilding industry as well as the textile and clothing industries collapsed in the 1980s and today has once again become a center of excellence and trading in a country where “service democracy” rules. Participants also visited world-class Swedish companies in the forefront of the quality and innovation movement not only in Sweden but also globally. Among companies visited were SKF, the inventor and leading global supplier of rolling bearings; SAAB Ericsson Space, a member of the Saab Group and an independent space equipment supplier that is a leader in digital and microwave technologies and mechanical systems; the Tuve plant of Volvo trucks; Volvo Logistics; and Semcon, a design and development company.

SKF, Volvo, and Ericsson have heavily influenced the business and quality and innovation culture not only in Göteborg but also in the rest of Sweden. SKF describes itself as a knowledge engineering company. Since product performance is critical to success, all the companies visited have continued to thrive because of their relentless drive for product and operational excellence. This was made possible by laying a solid foundation for quality improvement, cementing operations with quality management systems, and effective deployment of the Six Sigma strategy. To ensure that they maintain industry leadership, the companies have been working in partnership with leading universities, research institutions, and local government authorities through initiatives like the Lindholmen Science Park, where a rich overlapping between different skills and ideas has led to the creation of new products and innovations. The science park fuels growth in the Göteborg region and the whole of Sweden. A point often mentioned was the existence of a “forgiving culture” that allows employees to take risks and thus encourages creativity. The concepts of quality and innovation are at the heart of business systems and processes. To Claes Berlin, Quality Director, Saab Ericsson Space, “quality in the moment of truth” means practicing quality all the time, particularly at SAAB Ericsson where key processes are complex/critical and therefore allow no margin for error.



Participants visiting SKF

One of the key players in advancing the quality movement in Sweden has been the Swedish Quality Institute (SIQ), which for the past two decades has promoted total quality management (TQM). That has contributed to the creation of a competitive industrial sector and a public sector that is efficient and transparent. In private-sector enterprises, TQM application has resulted in operational efficiency. For employees, TQM permits greater involvement and responsibility in improving working conditions. The general public, on the other hand, has benefited from the national TQM movement because it results in the supply of better and more reasonably priced goods and services from both the private and public sector. Quality initiatives have thus affected everyone in the society and are now an integral part of daily life. To ensure that TQM became both widespread and widely understood, the SIQ founded the Swedish Quality Award in 1991.

Professor Claes Alvstam, Vice Dean of Göteborg University, stated that he was delighted to collaborate with the APO on the mission to Sweden and held the conviction that the mission would help further understanding between Sweden and Asia. 