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Integration or Takeover? Navigating the acquisition of a major hazard facility business

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ABSTRACT

In 2022, Viva Energy Australia announced the acquisition of the LyondellBasell Australia (LBA) polypropylene manufacturing business as part of its proposed development of a Geelong Energy Hub. The LBA business was the only Australian manufacturer of polypropylene, supplying more than sixty customers across Australasia, and was co-located with Viva Energy's oil refinery in Geelong. Whilst the facilities were connected, they had been licensed and operated as two separate Major Hazard Facilities for many years. Following the acquisition, the polypropylene plant initially operated as a standalone entity, maintaining separate operations, systems and governance from the refinery.

After a period of independent operation, a strategic decision was made to integrate the business into the broader Geelong Refinery. This integration aimed to realise efficiencies through economies of scale, including shared suppliers, warehousing, contracts and support functions. However, it also required the consolidation of two Major Hazard Facility licences, two safety management systems and all associated processes, documentation and governance components. Not only did this require careful planning with internal stakeholders, but also significant engagement and communication with key external stakeholders, in particular the regulator of the MHF regime.

The initial integration strategy involved implementing the refinery's established systems and processes across the polymers operation. Progress was slower than anticipated, and resistance to change emerged, reflecting differences in operational culture, risk perception and system maturity between the two organisations. In response, the approach was revised and greater responsibility and ownership were distributed across a broader group of personnel from both businesses. Increased involvement of operational and technical staff led to more practical system improvements, better engagement, and improved acceptance of change. As a result, the integration progressed more effectively, with enhancements made to management systems that benefitted both operations. This also resulted in regulatory approval of the change in operating licence.

KEY WORDS

Safety Management System (SMS), integration, Major Hazard Facility (MHF), change, consultation, stakeholders, risk, culture

BIOGRAPHY

Jenny Kisler is an experienced safety and risk professional with more than seven years at Viva Energy Refining, where she leads Major Hazard Facility (MHF) compliance, including Safety Case reviews, revisions, and relicensing. She previously worked with the Victorian regulator assessing Safety Cases for MHF licensing and spent several years as a risk and safety consultant supporting the national regulator and multiple MHFs. Jenny has extensive expertise in regulatory compliance, risk management, and the development and continuous improvement of Safety Case frameworks, contributing to safer, more resilient operations across high-risk industries.

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