

APPRENTICESHIP CASE STUDY

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New-style food manufacturing apprenticeships are helping to sow the seeds of a multi-skills culture at Dunns (Long Sutton) Ltd



New-style Apprenticeships in food manufacture are proving to be just the job for a growing agricultural seeds company, which is keen to continue developing a culture of multi skilling amongst its staff.

Dunns (Long Sutton) Ltd, of Long Sutton in Lincolnshire, has a permanent workforce of 23, including four apprentices, and is striving to achieve a competitive advantage through flexibility in the way people work. The firm likes to develop home-grown talent, and is finding that the new multiple-pathway Apprenticeship programmes for the food manufacturing sector allow the directors to instil the philosophy of multi-skilling from the start of young people's careers with the company.

Dunns supplies farmers with seed for crops such as wheat, barley, peas and beans. It also provides dried peas and beans for human consumption all over the world, including working with Food Aid to supply poor, developing nations. Eight years ago the firm went through a management buyout, and since then the philosophy of promoting a willingness among staff to wear several hats at once has been driven from the top. Finance director Judy Jeffries took on the additional responsibilities of training and personnel development manager.

"Following the management buyout we reviewed a number of policies, including training and personal development," she said. "We decided that investment in formal training would be a good way to develop the skills of individuals while also creating a greater sense of commitment to the job and of loyalty to the business, all of which leads to increased productivity. For a while we struggled to find the right kind of vocational training for our staff but the recent reforms in Apprenticeship programmes

have meant that we now have access to learning that can be easily adapted to meet our specific needs.”

Dunns has support from one of the country’s leading specialist food manufacturing training centres just down the road, at Holbeach. It’s part of the University of Lincoln and designated a network champion within the new National Skills Academy for Food and Drink Manufacturing.

“The training support we get from Holbeach is fantastic,” said Judy. “I cannot praise them highly enough. About a third of our employees are under 30 years old, and so we are working with Holbeach at many different levels, including having one employee working through the new foundation degree in food manufacturing. Currently we have three young people working through food manufacture Apprenticeship programmes, and a fourth doing an engineering Apprenticeship through the College of West Norfolk.

“The thing that pleases us so much about the new Apprenticeship programme in food manufacture is not only that the content is flexible, but so is the pace of delivery. Ours is a seasonal business determined by the agricultural calendar, so there are times when we have to take on temporary workers, and even then it’s a case of all hands to the pumps. When everyone is working flat out, the training programmes have to take second place for a while.

“Holbeach are absolutely brilliant about this and are happy to work around us. Their apprenticeship programme tutor David Godard comes to us to spend time with the apprentices for about half a day every fortnight, but he will modify the programme to work around our busy times. In some periods he might not come in for three weeks, and then at other times he might come every week for while. Occasionally the apprentices need to spend some time at the college, and we are happy to provide that time off.

“The fact that the Apprenticeship programme is fully funded by the government is a major benefit to a small company like ours. It means that we don’t mind providing a small amount of time for studies because we know we are getting something back from it, and it also motivates us to think about broader training, outside the Apprenticeship programme, which might not be publicly funded. We don’t mind paying for some additional training as long as it adds value to the investment in time we have already made. For instance, we are now looking at organising more

advanced food safety management training, which will be excellent for the apprentices.

“There is no doubt in my mind that since we started investing more time and effort in training, the company has benefited enormously, and I am also convinced that the new-style Apprenticeship programmes have increased the relevance and the value of that investment. The new thinking has created a better feel about the workplace, and it means we can tackle change, like the introduction shortly of a new £1.8 million production line for pulses. It’s going to require a multi-skilled approach, and we are confident we have the staff to do that successfully.”

The food manufacturing apprentices at Dunns

Kylie Quant (20) works in and manages the laboratory and is in the second year of a Level 3 Advanced Apprenticeship in food manufacture. She is following a learning pathway called Specialist Technical Skills.

Samantha Clark (20) also works in the laboratory and is in the first year of a Level 2 Apprenticeship in food manufacture, following the learning pathway called Operational Skills.

James Busfield (19) works mainly in the factory on the new robotic packing line. He is also in the first year of a level 2 Apprenticeship in food manufacture, and is following a learning pathway called Production Skills.