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Case Study – Jonathon Pearson, Apprentice of the Year

Ask most people how they would imagine working on a food factory production line, and they would probably describe a job that is low-skilled, low paid and lacking in opportunities to get ahead.

Jonathon Pearson, the reigning Apprentice of the Year, admits that that was the image of the industry he had when he first joined Schwan's Consumer Brands straight from school. But he now knows that things are not always how you first imagine them. Having discovered that the modern food industry is, in fact, fast-moving, full of opportunity and crying out for ambitious young recruits who are willing to learn new skills, Jonathon knows exactly what a little determination – and an apprenticeship - can achieve in the industry.

The 22-year-old started working at Schwan's Leyland factory, near Preston, in 2001, working on the production line where Chicago Town frozen pizzas are made. "I hadn't done very well in my exams at school," he admits, "and when I joined, I thought working on the line was all I'd ever be doing."

Things changed for Jonathon in 2005 when his bosses approached him to ask if he would like to take an apprenticeship. "I didn't even know you could do an apprenticeship in food and drink manufacturing," says Jonathon. "But Schwan's were interested in training up staff in-house rather than having to look elsewhere to find people with the right skills, so they asked me if I would like to have a go. It sounded like a good opportunity, so I thought why not?"

Jonathon was enrolled on an apprenticeship programme run by North Lancs Training Group and spent most of his time working in the factory earning a wage while he learned. Instead of sitting in a classroom, Jonathon was trained on the job in a variety of areas including leadership skills, health and safety, and employment responsibilities and rights. An assessor visited him regularly to monitor his progress as he built up a portfolio of qualifications that make up an apprenticeship, including a Level 2 NVQ in Food & Drink Manufacturing, a Basic Food Hygiene Certificate and a Basic Health & Safety Certificate. He also spent a small amount of time at college taking a course in Key Basic Skills, which covered numeracy and communication, and specialist competencies linked directly to his job at Schwan's.

During the 18 months it took to complete his apprenticeship, Jonathon blossomed into a key member of Schwan's 400-strong team, earning an Employee of the Month accolade as well as winning North Lancs Training's Best Overall Apprentice award for the year he was enrolled.

But even greater success was just around the corner. Within five months of completing his apprenticeship, Jonathon's bosses were so impressed with his progress that they made him a deputy team leader. Then, shortly after that, he was nominated for the national Apprentice of the Year prize, and was named the winner in a glitzy ceremony at the London Hilton in June 2007. The award has brought him some unexpected attention – including an invite to 10 Downing Street, where he discussed the benefits of apprenticeships with Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

“Winning the award was fantastic,” says Jonathon. “But it has been the experience of actually doing the apprenticeship that has changed everything for me. I now have better skills and knowledge which allow me to do my job better, but more than anything it has given me the drive to be ambitious and want to be a leader. I've learned things which are important in life in general, not just in work, such as maths and English. I didn't realise it in school, but in life you need these skills, otherwise you stay bottom of the pile. I really feel like I can aim for the top now.”

In his role as deputy team leader, Jonathon takes charge of a team of ten people on the production line. He works rotating shifts, starting either at five in the morning and finishing at 1pm, or starting at one in the afternoon working through to 9pm. He is responsible for keeping his team motivated to meet targets, minimising downtime and maintaining efficiency in the bakery. He has to make sure everyone sticks to procedures that ensure standards are maintained in product quality, and in health and safety.

Jonathon is also a member of a team which meets once a month to discuss ideas for the improvement of the company's health and safety policies - since he joined, accidents in the factory have been cut by 50 per cent. He has also helped draw up troubleshooting manuals to help new employees, night-shift staff, and other personnel to help reduce downtime during changeovers.

"I find my job very rewarding now," says Jonathon, "and having an apprenticeship has helped me find a lot of satisfaction in my work. It has also made me want to learn more. I've already done a Level Two NVQ in team leadership and I'm starting a Level Three NVQ in management shortly. I hope to be promoted to team leader within the next year, and after that I want to be a manager within five years. I could never have imagined myself saying that before I did my apprenticeship."

Improve, the food and drink sector skills council, is working to increase the number of apprenticeships available in food and drink manufacture five-fold by 2012, way ahead of government targets across all industries announced earlier this year. The organisation, which oversees food and drink qualifications in the UK, has recently introduced a new, flexible apprenticeship framework which allows trainees even more scope for tailoring what they learn to their specific job. "The advantages apprenticeships bring are clear to see," says Improve chief executive Jack Matthews. "An employee with a Level 2 Modern Apprenticeship on average earns 50 per cent more than a colleague without a qualification. And as Jonathon has discovered, if you want to climb the ladder, an apprenticeship is a great place to start."

Jonathon's advice to anyone considering an apprenticeship is simple. "Go for it," he said. "You will learn more than you ever imagined, and you earn a wage while you learn. Apprenticeships definitely help you get ahead, and the food and drink industry in particular provides plenty of opportunities."

APPRENTICESHIP FACT FILE

Salary: Depends on the company you work for, but many employers will offer you the normal wage for the job you do while you take your apprenticeship.

Qualifications: An apprenticeship is made up of several qualifications, including National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) which test practical skills, vocational qualifications such as City and Guilds certificates which test work-based knowledge, and qualifications in numeracy, communications and IT skills. A new framework for apprenticeships in food and drink manufacture covers specialist skills in all sub-sectors of the industry – bakery, meat and poultry, seafood, brewing and distilling, soft beverages, fresh produce, oil & fats, dairy, confectionery, milling and starches, animal feeds, general food processing, and food and drink wholesale.

Benefits: Getting paid while you earn a qualification. An apprenticeship also offers a fast-track to promotion and will help you earn more money – research has shown that workers who have served an apprenticeship in a manufacturing discipline earn 40-50 per cent more than colleagues who have not.

Downsides: Studying while working full-time can be hard work but in food manufacturing, the vast majority of assessment is carried out 'on-the-job' to help keep the workload to a minimum.

Ends

Note to editors

Improve is one of 25 sector skills councils established by the government to take the lead in driving up skills in the workplace in order to promote higher productivity and stronger competitiveness for UK businesses in the global market. Funded primarily by the government, sector skills councils are also supported by employers in their sectors, whose needs they represent when stimulating change among the providers of education and skills. Sector skills councils work closely with employers to promote greater commitment to improving skills in their workforces, and with schools, colleges, universities, and private training organisations to improve the provision of basic skills training and to make vocational and occupational training more relevant to the modern commercial climate.

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