



KNOWING TO GROW

INCREASING THE RESILIENCE OF PLANT-CENTRED FOOD PRODUCTION SKILLS

Case Study:

Developing the next generation of experts *G's Fresh*

BUSINESS PROFILE

G's Fresh is one of Europe's largest fresh produce companies – a vertically integrated business 'from seed to shelf'. It remains family owned and led, across its farms in Europe, West Africa and America. The company offers various routes into working for them, and supports a range of career development activity for its recruits and the wider sector. This includes programmes designed for recent graduates, offering them opportunities to gain experience across the company and its locations. G's has around 8,000 employees, with approximately half of these in seasonal roles.

THE CHALLENGE

Horticultural businesses in the UK have long reported difficulties in attracting high calibre employees, and a lack of candidates with relevant training or education. The number of graduates completing programmes specialising in horticultural skills and knowledge is relatively small, not least because there are so few courses available. Growers also require a range of specialists across their operations, and for these more generic specialisms they compete with other industries who may have a more appealing reputation amongst the target group.

The challenge is to attract employees with the potential to become highly capable contributors to the business, and to support them to gain any skills they lack.

THE RESPONSE 1: ATTRACTING GRADUATES

Each year G's recruit recent graduates to their Farm Management Training Scheme. This two-year programme is accredited by the Institute of Leadership Management and aims to develop those just starting their professional lives as growers, agronomists and technical specialists in food safety or data analysis. The programme provides competitive rates of pay, often subsidised housing, vehicle, and the G's rewards package. Trainees rotate through four placements across the company's business, and receive on the job training, exposure to industry thought leaders, mentoring, G's Early Careers learning and network programme, career and personal development plans, accredited leadership development and relevant qualifications e.g. BASIS and FACTS. After completion of the programme there is on average a 50% retention rate and long service thereafter.

G's success in attracting excellent graduates from across a wide range of courses is a result of various factors. Most obviously, the company has focused attention on this recruitment and tailored a package of activity to attract and develop recent graduates. This includes running selection days which help G's managers to understand the candidates and the roles which suit them, whilst exposing applicants to the company, its ethos and current employees. Recent recruits described how these occasions presented a welcoming and professional face of the organisation, with the presence of senior executives helping to convey its commitment to career development.

Crucially, G's do not solely recruit graduates from specialist courses or with prior experience of farming or growing. Recent graduates had educational backgrounds in a range of subject disciplines including Geography, Biology Environmental Science and Economics. This offers a wider pool of candidates including some with no familiarity with food production:

"The first time I ever stepped foot on a farm was my first day at work!"

In part this is because such a large organisation has a wide range of roles to fill, many of which are suited to relatively generic skills that graduates are likely to bring. Also it is unlikely graduates will have experience of working in production like that at G's.

Perhaps more significantly, directly relevant experience is not all that matters:

"I guess they're more looking for people with enthusiasm, and I guess, the general skills to, learn, and then, hopefully, in future succeed in the business."

If they recruit graduates with the right attitude and capabilities G's can support them to develop necessary knowledge as they work.

Recently recruited graduates had varying levels of familiarity with G's, the fresh produce sector or agriculture more broadly. Some were familiar with the company and reported that its reputation as a good employer had influenced their decision to apply. For those with no prior knowledge of G's, the company's goals and ethos were a crucial influence on the decision to work for them. A strong theme was the importance of sustainability in the company values, and the sense that through working for them it is possible to contribute to the socially valuable goal of feeding people in a sustainable way:

"I'm really enthused by sustainability. I try and practice what I preach as much as is possible. And I think having the ability to make changes which actually produce real world results, and because we're farming on such a large scale. You can actually see that you're making a change".

For recruits not looking specifically for positions within food and agriculture, these values were a significant factor in selecting this programme over opportunities in other sectors.

Some of what makes the company an appealing destination for a first career is its scale – as indicated in the above comment. For those seeking insight to the sector size matters:

"It's one of the largest farming operations in the UK and Europe, which exposes you to a lot of scale and precision and professionalism".

For those not necessarily focused on a future in food or farming, the company's scale is also beneficial as it offers potential to experience a range of roles and locations. The training programme allows graduates to taste a range of opportunities and find one which suits their interests or strengths. Those entering with a more specific skill-set or career path in mind – such as plant scientist or data analyst – find working in a large company beneficial for its resources and capacity which enable access to learning opportunities such as advice from leading experts or global best practice.

THE RESPONSE 2: DEVELOPING GRADUATES

Graduate trainees typically begin with a rotation of placements in different parts of G's, allowing them to work for six months in a role and understand that aspect of the business. This breadth of exposure was appealing to recent recruits:

“It’s been incredibly varied and, and very fast paced and hard to keep up to speed with it, but really exciting at the same time. And I’ve had lots of exposure across different operations and offices and different teams. So it’s been fantastic really.”

For those without a definite specialism in mind this system helps G's and the employee establish which role they best suit. It has the additional benefit of providing insight to different parts of the operation, knowledge which proves beneficial in future as employees are often required to collaborate across teams. Opportunities to work in different contexts and with many people are another appeal of working for G's with recent recruits enjoying the variety of people they interact with.

The range of opportunities and sheer number of employees also means it is possible to pursue a long and varied career within the company. Graduates noted this as one attraction, and found “a lot of chance for progression and exposure early on”.

Not all intend to stay for the long term, but there is potential to do so whilst continuing to find new experiences and advancement. For some the goal is to develop skills and experience then move on, perhaps to manage a family farm. For G's it is worth investing in the careers of these individuals too – both for the value they put into the company whilst they work there, and to benefit the sector as a whole by enhancing its skills base.

The management training programme supports learning and development in multiple ways, often tailored to the role and person. Recent recruits described benefiting from formalised training courses and accredited qualifications. Beyond this, all noted the amount of knowledge and skills acquired by doing their role and learning from colleagues. Learning on the job is inevitable because of how unique G's' operations are, meaning some essential knowledge can only be acquired in this way.

Several graduate recruits noted that the organisation celebrates a culture of learning, with initiatives such as lunch time talks encouraging employees to gain knowledge from experts beyond their area. This ethos means that employees are supported to pursue educational opportunities alongside their work, for example specialist higher education programmes.

This shares learning beyond the individual because they have “learnt things on that course and brought information and knowledge into the business”. Taking time out from daily responsibilities benefits rather than costs the company. Supporting personal development also conveys to employees that they are valued.

A key dimension of the programme is how the graduate recruits are enabled to develop as individuals. In part this is because of the degree of independence and autonomy they are trusted with relatively early on:

“they push you to a limit that you didn’t know you had and they push you in ways that you’ve never experienced before. There are challenges but every time that a challenge does pop up, it’s known as a learning curve there has not been one that I would say is a negative challenge, it’s all been turned into something that I’ve developed or grown with.”

Such experiences depend on selecting recruits with the potential to develop in this way, then ensuring they are suitably supported by colleagues.



LEARNING AND REFLECTIONS

The scale and structure of G's as a company means they have capacity to recruit and develop graduates to an extent which is relatively unique in the UK. However, there are lessons from their programme and recruits which can apply more broadly.

Firstly, the sector can look to a broad range of graduates to bring valuable skills and capabilities, beyond the obvious pool of courses focused on horticulture or agriculture. The appetite to work in food production might be found in a range of disciplines; conversely, the industry can offer opportunities across a wide-range of specialisms. Exposure to companies like G's helps graduates recognise that the sector can offer diverse career pathways.

To offer the range of opportunities that graduates appreciate it may be necessary for companies to collaborate to offer a range of learning and development akin to that available within G's. Some companies already operate this model, for example the MDS partnership.

The generation of graduates entering employment in coming years are likely to seek employers with values resonating with their own. For many this means furthering social and environmental benefits, for example through feeding people good, environmentally sound food. A business demonstrating sustainability in its values and practices will attract these recruits.

Graduates without an obvious connection to horticulture or agriculture in their education and interests can be attracted to work in the fresh produce industry through opportunities to work in varied, rewarding roles. Companies which convey that employees are valued and enabled to learn also appeal. This does not mean that roles should be easy or in comfortable conditions – as is often not the case. Graduates understand that good work does not always equal easy work, particularly if they are supported to push themselves then reflect on their experience.

The key seems to be striking a balance between challenge which stretches and which squeezes employees.

Recruits without a background in farming can encounter a culture shock when they begin working around crop production. If the sector wants to attract high calibre graduates, it should be ready to welcome those from all backgrounds, and ensure that their entry to work is sensitive to this transition and provide personal support to handle change.



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