KNOWING TO GROW
INCREASING THE RESILIENCE OF PLANT-CENTRED FOOD PRODUCTION SKILLS

Case Study:
Keeping and improving seasonal workers
EC Drummond

BUSINESS PROFILE
EC Drummond has been a family farm in Herefordshire since 1956, and has since grown to include mixed agricultural and other businesses nationally. The original farm is now home to their soft fruit operation including a packhouse supplying strawberries to major UK supermarkets and internationally. The fruit is grown in a table-top system in polytunnels, operating for around eight months of the year across more than 40 hectares. The whole business has around 100 employees with an additional 300 seasonal workers annually, predominantly for soft fruit production, picking and packing.

THE CHALLENGE
Like many soft fruit growers, the farm relies on seasonal workers across the key harvest period. This labour represents a significant proportion of production costs meaning that worker efficiency has a significant impact on profit margins. Limits on numbers available through the seasonal workers pilot scheme and changing European migration patterns have made it harder to attract sufficient workers. Uncertainty around recruitment numbers is a hindrance for a business trying to plan cropping and coordinate complex logistics. In addition to easing recruitment challenges, there are huge benefits from retaining employees for a whole season and encouraging them to return year on year. Returnees bring their experience of the work, which means efficiency and productivity gains.

The challenge is to encourage good workers to return for successive seasons, and to maximise the efficiency of everyone employed to pick.
THE RESPONSE 1: PUTTING ON ‘LEAN’ GLASSES

EC Drummond staff joined SmartHort sessions offered by AHDB to look at applying LEAN to their business. The programme aimed to support growers to find productivity improvements:

“to get the best out of the people they had within the business, so they could maximise the skills that they had available to them.”

Through the training and discussions the team identified a range of business improvement projects to apply and explore the process with support from the specialist. One project focused on picker efficiency: how is it that some workers have picking rates many times the average, consistently delivering very high productivity? And could other pickers become as efficient?

To explore this, the team put on their LEAN glasses, as the trainer describes it. They spent time videoing their fastest pickers, analysing the footage and examining what made them so fast, comparing this with slower workers. This helped them understand how the rate of picking was improved through coordinating movement of a picker’s trolley to allow a constant movement along the fruit row. A well organised, ergonomic arrangement of picker, fruit and trolley minimises time wasted as the worker’s hands and eyes are constantly on the fruit as they move down the tunnel.

With a better understanding of how a picker can be most efficient the team prepared materials to train other pickers, showing them how to be effective and fast. Induction of new workers was enhanced to share these insights through visual materials which communicate more immediately the best ways to complete a task.

During the first season of applying these lessons the picking operation has benefited from increased efficiency with pickers becoming quicker overall, and new employees able to gain productivity sooner. These gains can help offset challenges in securing sufficient pickers. Costs of developing and delivering picker training are more than covered by resulting productivity gains. Overall, growers participating in the SmartHort programme saw productivity gains of 20-25%.

Now they are familiar with the LEAN process and thinking, the EC Drummond team are applying it to other parts of the operation, questioning how things have typically been done to seek improvements. The training and insights shared enable them to look at their own business with an eye on waste and inefficiency. The success of their focus on picking rates motivates them to take the time to analyse potential improvements in other parts of the business.

WHAT IS LEAN?

“It’s just a systematic way of analysing business processes and looking at where there’s opportunities to eliminate waste. Once that waste has been eliminated, look at what that extra capacity can be used for – either productivity improvements, or developing the business, or diversification. So it creates capacity within the business, essentially.”

The SmartHort programme led by AHDB introduced LEAN to horticultural businesses. It used live case study farms to demonstrate how the process can improve productivity, and to inspire growers to adopt it.
The farm has an excellent track record in retaining seasonal staff year on year, with a returnee rate of more than 70%. Some workers have been returning for more than a decade, with several progressing through to supervisory and managerial roles. Working to ensure that people want to come back after a season ends is a priority. Not only does it reduce the effort around recruiting new staff, it also means that experienced workers come back and deliver good productivity immediately. Returnees are also well placed to help upskill new recruits.

Measures which help encourage returnees include ensuring that on site accommodation is of a good standard, and that issues are heard and acted on. Financial rewards are offered for completing a whole season, and for starting early in the year.

Incentives such as gifts for the month’s fastest pickers add to the package of rewards. Although covid restrictions have hampered some activity, those living on site are also provided social offers such as trips to a swimming pool. Events such as a caravan garden competition foster a sense of community and help management interact with the team as individuals.

Seasonal workers are encouraged to discuss their concerns and needs through an employee forum. The farm has also introduced a new floating supervisor/motivator who spends time observing teams, noting quality or efficiency issues and addressing them one to one. This colleague becomes a friendly encouraging presence who can engage at a personal level, perceived as more a peer than an intimidating manager.

Thinking about how to encourage returnees is a key concern for the farm’s HR manager. Time spent listening to workers’ needs and money invested in trying to make them as satisfied as possible reaps the benefits of maximal return rates.

This brings efficiencies and productivities associated with having more experienced, more efficient workers from the outset of the next season. Knowing at the end of the season how many workers plan to return next year also takes some uncertainty out of labour planning, and reduces the amount of work dedicated to recruitment.

In recent years there have been greater complexities around returns as workers from overseas may now require visas or settled status. This creates an administrative and cost burden, making working in the UK a less attractive option in comparison with EU countries. Immigration rules also preclude the ideal seasonal pattern for picking as it places a 6 month limit and prohibits return within a 6 month period from the end of the issued visa. Applying for a visa can also create delays and costs, whilst reducing the certainty that a worker can be present for specific dates.
LEARNING AND REFLECTIONS

These two areas of business improvement have synergies as more productive workers earn more, creating further incentives to return, whilst returnees are likely to be more productive.

Beyond illustrating the benefits of applying LEAN within horticulture, the SmartHort programme shows how support designed around real examples and live projects encourages businesses to participate. They can apply learning to achieve gains straight away. A key skill gained through LEAN training is the ability to take a step back and reflect on processes. Benefits extend beyond participation as this is applied to seek continuous improvements across operations, and colleagues inspire and guide others to apply this. The time taken to do this work results in benefits and savings which more than cover the cost of pausing daily tasks. These paybacks can incentivise other businesses to pursue this type of training and development.

Focusing on improving efficiency benefits seasonal workers whose income is linked to work rate. Productivity gains which benefit business and employees create a virtuous circle: employees who are earning more stay longer meaning the business benefits from their efficiency, and they are more likely to return meaning efficiencies continue in future years. Investing in measures to promote staff satisfaction pays dividends in terms of retention, returns and reduced recruitment burden.

Encouraging good rates of return is achieved through treating staff as the valued resource that they are – meeting their needs so they are happy in work and home.

LEAN training materials and guidance for growers are available online: ahdb.org.uk/smarthort-lean-modules

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