

# Growing Jobs – Case Studies

## Recruiting Outside the Industry

One issue that concerns many growers is where the new blood is going to come from to run the industry in the future.

The number of horticultural graduates is diminishing fast as courses close while those that do graduate seem not to look for a career in production horticulture.

In today's supply chain dominated industry horticultural businesses are often as much about organisational and commercial skills as they are about growing with production and packing businesses making a large contribution to overall turnover.

So it becomes a sensible approach to recruit bright graduates from numerate disciplines like engineering, science and economics to come into the industry.

Several companies have started taking graduates from non traditional degrees intending to train them in the necessary plant science they need once they've become established.

One example is Bardsley's at River Farm near Maidstone. The company grows top and stone fruit and runs a pack station – one of five in their co-operative - on 110 hectares in Kent.

Bardsley's employ 20 people in the pack house packing their own stone and top fruit and top fruit from other growers for the co-operative.

They have taken on a graduate as Junior Manager in their pack house. Gavin Phelps shown here with owner Nigel Bardsley has a degree in English and Communication from the University of Cardiff.



Nigel and Gavin inspect incoming fruit

He had been already working on the packing line at River Farm when the then Pack house manager retired.

Gavin applied for the job and Nigel and his sister in law, Lesley Bardsley who is in overall charge of the pack house, decided to give Gavin a trial for the position.

Scheduling orders can be quite complex as it's sometimes necessary for extra orders to be added at short notice.

Nigel and Lesley had been fully occupied in ensuring that the day to day business was effectively processed and the time needed for planning the future strategic direction of the business was being squeezed. Employing Gavin has successfully given back the time for strategy to drive the business forward.

Action Points – What do you do well?

What could you improve?

What will you do next?

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## Learning the Trade

Gavin was taken on in September and quickly overcame his initial challenge of getting respect from the rest of the workforce who up till then had seen him as a fellow worker.

The next task was to organise the workforce effectively. Gavin had to master keeping an eye on several packing areas, making sure that there was a consistent flow of fruit to the line and that staff were working most effectively.



Inside the Packhorse

He had to learn the ergonomics of how to set up the line and learn the tricks of making sure that you get the best performance out of the staff through personal motivation, direction and about making sure that everything is in place at the beginning of the shift.

“If the line is 15 minutes late in starting for 20 people that represents a day’s wages – so I make sure that everything is ready in advance.”

## Issues in a nutshell

This is a highly responsible position which involves keeping the lines busy and ensuring that there is a consistent flow of fruit of the right quality to the Supermarkets who are the main customers of the co-operative.

Getting the delivery wrong can cost the organisation a fine of up to £60,000 from the Supermarket.

According to Nigel, Gavin’s 3 priorities are

1. Make sure that the pack house, a stand alone cost and profit unit runs profitably.
2. Maximise the returns to the other growers how use the facility.
3. Make sure that the supermarkets get on time on quality fruit.

Looking after the other growers is key. Nigel said “I know how it hurts a grower to see top quality fruit end up in the juice bin. We need to make sure that the growers get the best deals they can. If we let them down they can always go elsewhere”

“It’s critical that we get as much efficiency since we operate in an industry with such tight margins

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## Next steps



After nearly 6 months, Gavin is coping well with the challenge of keeping the line running, rearranging schedules when large additional orders come in and optimising the line to keep the work rate from everyone going at a workable level.

He's become able to source additional orders if it looks like the work load is running low and has grown in confidence at dealing with the multiples who are some of the most sophisticated buyers in the country.

He's also managed to take the facility through the BRC audit leaving Lesley able to focus on developing the future strategy of the business.

Next challenges are to become more involved in the financial side of the operation and to learn what constitutes good quality fruit. Nigel is convinced that he can teach Gavin what he needs to know about how to effectively judge the quality of the fruit so that he can get the best deal for the other growers who use the pack house.

This will eventually lead Gavin to appreciate what it takes to grow top quality fruit so that over time he will acquire an understanding of the totality of the business.

Bardsley's also have 2 Eastern European graduates working in supervisory positions within the company, one in the pack house and one in the growing team. So the company is slowly building the in depth skill set that the company needs to secure and develop its future.

Apart from his common sense, drive and enthusiasm, Gavin also brings IT skills with him. Like all food related industries, traceability compliance and the need to demonstrate effective quality processes to customers means that the need for IT competence in the business is always increasing.

With all this under his belt, Gavin will be in a position to fully appreciate the subtleties of an often political market and proactively develop deals with suppliers and customers to reach the full profit potential of the pack house.



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## How has it worked out?

### Gavin

When the vacancy came up I thought “I could do that job. It would be more interesting with more responsibility than the other first line graduate jobs I had been considering.”

“Not many people understand what this industry is like. It’s a technical business that offers reasonably paid interesting work and gave me the chance to prove what I can do.”

“I relish the challenge of keeping my team motivated and making sure that I deliver the right quality of fruit to the customers. “

“I’d certainly recommend graduates to consider working in this industry.”

### Lesley

“Nigel and I were fully engaged in the day to day running of the business. What taking Gavin on has done has freed me up to be proactive in managing the financial side of the business and to focus on strategic planning for the future. “



“As a direct result of Gavin being here, we have been able to push through an expansion project to us to the next rung on the ladder and help secure the company’s future.”

### Nigel

“We had a vacancy which we needed to fill. I had felt for a while we needed a graduate but it’s difficult to attract them from the horticultural courses as these are getting fewer and the calibre of the students isn’t great.”

“I thought it would be a good idea to recruit someone we could train to our own ways rather than a fully experienced manager.”

“We have the set up to train him in place and it’s been a real education both for him and for ourselves. To some extent he’s been thrown in the deep end but we’ve been able to offer the support he’s needed.”

“What it’s given us is the ability to plan and develop the business. We’ve been able to plan a major expansion which we wouldn’t have been able to achieve without him in place to manage the day to day running of the pack house facility.”

“We are very pleased with the results to date and would certainly employ graduates again to allow us to carry on investing in the future of the business.”

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