

# Growing Jobs – Case Studies

## Humber-VHB - Creating a work bank

A theme that has run consistently through the project is the issue of flexible working. However there seems to be reluctance from some to see this as a two way street.



Several growers expressed the view that one of the reasons they found Eastern European labour more reliable is they want to work full time. Local English people by contrast were often constrained by their home arrangements to start and finish at non standard times and to have afternoons off from time to time to attend to family issues.

In many industries this style of flexible working has become normal with temporary staff working the hours that suit them and the employing organisation organising itself to make this possible.

One company in production horticulture that has positively embraced this approach to accommodate sudden peaks in demand from its supermarket customers is Humber-VHB.

The site Director Chris Moncrieff explains.

“Like most growers we had developed a situation where we had a stable core team supplemented by agency staff who would come in to deal with sudden peaks in demands for fresh or cut herbs from their customers the major Supermarkets.”

“However the situation didn’t really work that well. Thinking back we had 3 main problems.

- 1) The agency staff were untrained and weren’t familiar with our particular ways of working. So they weren’t efficient and took time to get up to speed. If they are only with us for a day then that has a significant impact on our day to day performance.
- 2) They were often brought in by coach from a considerable distance away – that meant they were tired and so were less attentive.
- 3) Most importantly they had no rapport with the rest of the team that they would be working with. This led to a risk of poor communication resulting in loss of performance.”

“Not to mention the minor issue that agency labour carries a hefty premium of 25-30% over the minimum wage. “

“We moved away from this approach when we recruited a new HR Manager. She had worked for the NHS in her last job where it’s common practice for hospital trusts to create their own bank of temporary staff.”

Action Points – What do you do well?

What could you improve?

What will you do next?

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“Members of the bank will be already trained in the procedures they need to carry out and will already have been through a formal induction programme.”

“When they arrive for work they already know what they’re doing, know the people they will be working with and are able to just get on with the task in hand.”

“So we decided to give it a go. We thought that if the NHS can staff operating theatres doing brain surgery like this, then surely we will be able to use the same approach to grow a few herbs. And do you know we were absolutely right.”

“Not only do we get operational benefits but the staff like it too.”

“Flexibility for them means that they can work when they like – but we know that when they do come in they know exactly what they have to do.”

“We have no obligation to offer work and they have no obligation to accept it. But in practice we know there’s a fluctuating amount of extra work needed to supply the produce needed to the supermarkets as the weather and other external factors affects the base load of demand.”

This means bank staff members can be sure that on average there will be a reasonable amount of work available for them.

One member of the bank staff, Sandra Woodliffe, estimates that in practice she works 3-4 days a week.. “I really like the flexibility and control it gives me” she said.



When a peak arrives, the company rings up the staff to let them know that there’s 3 days work available for example. If the individual can only manage 2 of them that can be accommodated -there’s enough redundancy in the bank to cover it as there’s about 3 times the Full Time Equivalent cover.

Organisation and smooth running is greatly improved while at the same time the bank staff are paid at a standard rate without the uplift that’s required for agency staff.

Unexpectedly, this approach seems to have effectively managed to get more English people working in horticulture.

It turns out that many of the people working in the bank are local people - students needing to top up their loans, and people in their 40s on a second career or having retired early. And it provides a route for some to get back into full time working.

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Like many companies in the industry, Humber prefers their staff to work reasonable hours. They run a 2 shift week for their core staff with some people working Sunday to Thursday and some working Tuesday to Saturday. The bank approach is an ideal solution for topping up the days when they have only a single shift on.



Staff like it because they can turn work down if it doesn't suit them at that time secure in the knowledge that it won't compromise their chances of future work. And most of them live locally so their travel to work is easy.

Neither of these advantages would be available to them if they were working through an agency.

Staff have been successfully recruited for the bank by simply advertising in local shops and the local paper.

## Lean and Business Improvement Techniques

Humber, like other larger growers are seriously getting to grips with implementing lean methods into their business.

Chris Moncrieff explains that the pressure to be more efficient has led the company to seriously work at improving its work practices.

They had previously looked at Lean and while impressed with the possibilities had found it a bit over complicated. However they did adopt BIT – Business Improvement Techniques - an approach that suits the needs of the company and which leads to NVQ qualifications so attracting funding.

The project based approach helps improve performance to meet the just in time delivery requirements of the supermarkets by removing wasted time from operations. The approach is very visual – whether using Kan-Ban techniques or making the storage areas tidy and efficient.-or using highly visual outlines to make sure items go back where they should be..



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Currently Humber have 3 projects running in different areas One team that we talked to were focusing on the ergonomics of packing.



## One day's packaging materials + access ways

Clear routes to move packaging from storage to the packing bay were laid down and policies put in place so that the day's supply of packaging was all put together in one place at the start of the day as you see here.

Lean is highly visual relying on charts, images and patterns to make it easy for people to be organised. Here's workshop manager Stuart Sedgwick with the week's schedule planner.



## Lean in a nutshell

Lean manufacturing is a methodology that aims to ensure that all activity in the company is organised around delivering value to the customer.

It aligns processes and people around a continuously improving value chain and simplifies operations and eliminates waste by making processes visible.

One practical approach towards achieving Lean is the Business Improvement Techniques programme adopted at Humber-VHB. It's a project based approach and typically involves a team leader and a team of around 6 undertaking a project as evidence for a NVQ level 2 qualification (level 3 for the team leader).

The programme identifies 7 wastes to be tackled

- Transport
- Inventory
- Movement
- Waiting
- Over-production
- Over-processing
- Defects

It also charmingly identifies 5 "S"s for improving workplace clutter.

Sort, Set, Shine, Standardise, Sustain.

A great lesson for us all.

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