

## SALAD DAYS

Vitacress Salads Ltd is Europe's leading grower, packer and distributor of watercress and baby leaf salads. It has production sites in the UK, Portugal, Kenya and the US, supplying products to its packing operations in Amesbury and Andover. The next time you bring home a prepared salad from the supermarket, give another thought to the skills of the staff who work in the high-tech, high-care production process that is prepared salads.

"We do the hard stuff best," says Tony Alcock, human resources manager at Vitacress. "We are a low-volume, high-value producer. How do I pay for training? Well, to cut £100,000 off the bottom line, we only have to save 20 reworks on the production line in a year.

"For example, if the wrong sell-by date is put on a bag of salad, the whole batch will have to be reworked. Reworking 30,000 bags would cost £5,000 in labour, as the shift would have to stay on. By getting things right first time and eradicating basic errors, the target of £100,000 can be achieved. Of course, £100,000 on the bottom line at 10 per cent margin is equivalent to generating an extra £1,000,000 turnover. Basic skills training definitely pays," says Tony.

Vitacress Salads Ltd, in the Test Valley, Hampshire, produced more than 42 million bags of specialist salads last year. It grows, crops and packages its own products, which have to arrive at the supermarket in peak quality, in correct volumes and just in time to go on the shelves.

"We started with English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) for our production staff, and were happy to pay them for the hour a week they came to the conference room to improve their English with a tutor from Cricklade, our local college," says Tony: "It's obviously important for us to get things right the first time, for staff to be able to read, understand and follow our very stringent hygiene regulations.

"However, the savings don't stop there. Investing in training also reduces absenteeism and improves staff retention, and that saves again. If you want to know the theory, it is about raising self-esteem. Do that and people will stay with you."

Vitacress was approached by Taryn Jerling, community learning manager at Cricklade college, following a successful bid to the Hampshire essential skills support unit's basic skills capacity building and employer engagement fund.

The funding enabled Cricklade to develop and deliver a series of intensive, three-day, essential skills awareness programmes (accredited through OCN at Level 2) to 80 human resource managers in the Test Valley. The programme was very hands-on.

In advance of the training days, HR managers were each sent a copy of both the Numeracy and Literacy National Curriculum and the Employer Toolkit (available free from [www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus)). In class, they took these apart, dissected them and then were challenged and guided to adapt them to their own business. "First we had to get HR managers to come," said Taryn, speaking at the celebration to mark the end of the project.

"We worked with our marketing team and decided on a broad range of marketing strategies, including working with local TV, radio and the Andover Advertiser. Then there were the breakfast meetings. It was a shock setting the alarm for 5am, but it paid off and we engaged human resource managers, like Tony, from local companies, and were able to persuade several of them to take up the training."

The production process at Vitacress is very labour-intensive and high-tech, but relies on careful management attention at every stage. "After I had been on the essential skills awareness course, I started looking at the emails and reports generated by our supervisors and production managers," says Tony.

"We tend to nurture our own supervisors and production managers from the shop floor, so I was aware that many had left school with just two or three GCSEs. However, I was still surprised at the outcome of the training needs analysis that Taryn conducted for us. Mind you, I got Maths and not English at school, and I had to re-study English as I struggled with the assignments for my IPD qualification. This was 16 years after leaving full-time education."

"With Taryn's guidance we settled on "Report Writing for Managers". The college closely adapted an off-the-shelf course to relate to our styles and layouts, and we offered three days' paid training off-site at Cricklade

so that the managers would not lose esteem or be disturbed while training. The offer was taken up by 20 supervisors and production managers.

Now when the supervisors come in with: "I have an idea", I can say: "I need a factual report". They reply: "Oh, like the reports we were trained to do." For example one of our trainee supervisors, Julie Pitt, had an idea for reducing waste, and this is now in a formal report, and we are working on the costings. This will increase productivity. It all goes to offset the 0.5% investment off staff budget that I allocated to the basic skills training," says Tony. As if by magic, Julie Pitt arrives with her report to discuss the costings with Tony.

Julie is the twilight, high-care shift supervisor for the section, where hygiene is at its highest levels. "I left school with nothing, slow at reading and atrocious at maths. School told me I would never amount to anything. You end up believing it." Julie says.

"I've had many jobs, worked for McDonald's, hotels, big retail companies, been an army wife and travelled. So my friends ask why I do a job that starts at 2pm and goes on till 11pm, where I have to wear three layers of clothing to keep out the cold, ear defenders to keep out the noise, and then have to change in and out of boots and protective clothing 20 times a day and wash my hands twice every single time I go on the floor. But Vitacress has given me the opportunity to do something with my life.

"Being a supervisor means having to use email, the computer order board and write reports. But I had never written a report. So the course was really useful. It was also excellent fun, all of us enjoyed it and it has been so useful," says Julie.

Where next though? "Well, I would like to learn how to use a computer properly, from the bottom-up. There is nothing to stop me going on now. You can do it if you put your mind to it. One of our managers was a machine operator. Learning gives you the confidence, real self-confidence."