



## **Acas delivers tailored Works Council training and Equalities training to help a growing SME keep on top of the challenges that come with workforce expansion**

This case study explores how Acas helped Blue Earth Foods – a burgeoning seafood processing company – to overcome some of the challenges of rapid growth, through tailored Works Council training and Equalities training. As a result of the training the Works Council’s agenda is now more in line with company objectives, and is improving communication across the organisation, and the Equalities training is having a positive influence on workplace relations.

### **Background to the organisation**

Blue Earth Foods is a seafood processing company based in Redditch and operating within a global network of seafood companies. Formed in 2009, Blue Earth Foods has experienced rapid growth, with 2012 turnover around £50 million, earned by processing and adding value to seafood for its two major retail clients, for whom the close control across the whole supply chain afforded by the network is a key selling point.

The company’s rapid turnover growth has required rapid workforce growth, from around 15 people to over 300 in 2012, comprising 240 permanent and 80 agency workers. There is no recognised trade union at Blue Earth Foods, though not because of company opposition; however the company has had a Works Council for some time.

Inevitably rapid growth brings its own challenges, as the HR Manager explained:

“We’ve got to turn that nice, friendly, company into an organisation that makes money”.

Acknowledging this, the company appointed its first HR Manager in 2012, prior to which the HR function had been seen as a largely administrative role. The new HR Manager set about establishing a more professional HR structure that would put the company on a sound footing on which to move forward. The HR manager is assisted by two staff.



## Choosing Acas to provide tailored training

Although there are currently no major employment relations issues within the company, employment legislation is a concern, due to its complexity and frequent changes. This may particularly be the case for SMEs such as Blue Earth Foods, who lack the HR capacity of larger organisations:

“It’s a nightmare ... it changes so much... When I started in this career 30 years ago, it was about what was morally right and morally wrong. Whereas now it seems like every decision has to be interpreted by a solicitor”.

HR Manager

The company strives to be a good employer. It is proud of the employment it has generated locally, and tries to have policies that exceed the legal minimum. This ambition lies behind the decision to invite Acas to provide training to improve the effectiveness of the Works Council, and to help supervisors and managers deal with Equalities issues. The HR Manager had used Acas in previous jobs, and knew that they would design a service around his needs. In particular, that Acas understands that the food industry is fast-paced and demanding, with long working hours and relatively poor pay. Consequently it is not easy to free up significant numbers of staff for discretionary training.

“I’ve been dealing with Acas for a long time now, (it’s a) good organisation.... (They) understand the food industry, and not many trainers do”.

HR Manager

## Works Council training

The Works Council is a valuable resource, providing early identification of the causes of any shopfloor discontent, but it was not working as effectively as it could be, and had not evolved to adapt to a much larger and more diverse workforce. This view was confirmed when a staff survey revealed that workers were dissatisfied with communication between the shopfloor and senior management. This finding helped to convince all members of the Works Council that something needed to be done to improve its effectiveness.

The HR Manager worked with Acas to design a training package that would better equip Works Council members to actively listen to, and represent all members of the workforce. The training was developed using background documentation provided by the company, and liaising closely by telephone. The standard Acas training for workplace representative bodies was used as a starting point, but the HR manager was able to choose the elements most relevant to his workplace, to produce a specification around which the training focused. It was delivered on site in August 2012 and attended by all Works Council members.



“(They learned that) they shouldn’t have their own agenda, and how to conduct themselves, things like they would have access to privileged information that they had to keep that to themselves.... And I can say that in the vast majority of cases that training has proved to be very, very valuable”.

HR Manager

Acas training improved member understanding of key issues, including responsibility to represent the broad constituency, and the need for confidentiality. The company quickly saw signs of improvement, with staff representatives leading a consultation about new shift patterns, and producing positive proposals for management consideration. The Works Council’s agenda is now more in line with company objectives, and is improving communication across the company.

## **Equalities training**

The company employs a diverse workforce with a wide range of ethnicities and nationalities. Management is aware that, within a diverse workforce, misunderstandings and discrimination can occur if individuals are not conscious of their own preconceptions.

On the advice of the Acas trainer the Equalities training was designed to be delivered in mixed groups of managers, office staff and shopfloor team/line leaders, so that attendees were exposed to a range of different perspectives. This approach proved very effective with 33 people attending. The equalities training was delivered on-site in August 2012.

As such training has long-term objectives with the aim of preventing future problems, it is difficult to identify short-term impact. However, the HR manager was confident that the training resonated with people, and is already influencing workplace relations.

“... People come up to me and say that they really enjoyed that training, and they’ll talk about a particular aspect, which means that it did have an effect ... hopefully they’ll think about what they say and what they do, more than they did”.

## **Conclusions**

Blue Earth Foods has experienced rapid growth, with all the challenges that come with such success. It is now putting in place the professional HR infrastructure needed to ensure positive workplace relations in a business in which the Directors no longer know every individual by name.

In a demanding commercial environment it can be difficult to justify investment in communication channels and soft skills, but Blue Earth Foods believes it is quickly witnessing positive impact from the training, which would not have been achieved without the involvement of Acas.

“I know that Acas can deliver, they’ve never let me down”

HR Manager