

Case Study

**SCOTLAND
FOOD & DRINK
PARTNERSHIP**

Fair working practices are good for business

“If you can eliminate employees’ stresses, you have a more productive and more loyal workforce. People buy into the company and want it to succeed if they feel valued by the company.

At the end of the day, a business has to work as a team – everyone in the company has a voice and is listened to. If you don’t value and listen to everyone, it doesn’t work.”

John Farley, Director, Sutherlands of Portsoy

Who we are

We are a traditional smokehouse dating back to 1908, based in the idyllic village of Portsoy on the north east coast of Scotland. We have an established core range of the finest smoked Scottish fish which we sell locally, online and door to door and export all over the world, as well as supporting the hospitality sector across the north east. We also have an innovation range which looks to partner with food and drink producers in the north east.



Building a culture of fair work

When our owner/managing director, John Farley bought Sutherland’s of Portsoy three years ago, he set about building a team culture. As he says, **“I could be the greatest entrepreneur in the world, but unless I’ve got a team behind me, it would be valueless.”**

The Scottish Government’s ‘Fair Work’ initiative wasn’t on our radar when we were

putting our team-building and workforce development practices in place.

Even so, our practices align closely to the Scottish Government definition of fair work as **‘work that offers effective voice, respect, security, opportunity and fulfilment’**. We also follow its Fair Work practices of investing in skills and training and ensuring no inappropriate use of zero hours contracts.

We hope other businesses can learn from the way we do things.

Skills and training

All our employees do the mandatory food sector training, such as food safety, but increasingly staff want to do courses beyond the standard requirements. It makes their jobs more interesting and stimulating and improves **loyalty** as well as skills.

“The great thing for me is that the skills development element has become competitive. If someone qualifies in a certain direction, someone else says they want to do it too. That helps the business as well as the individuals, so we actively encourage it,” explains John Farley.

As an example, one of our 19 employees is currently doing a Business Studies degree at Robert Gordon University on a Graduate

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Apprenticeship scheme, and another employee now hopes to do the same.

Workforce voice

We have regular ‘Toolbox’ meetings for the whole company, where we talk about upcoming developments, changes in the business, new policies or plans we’re considering, or any issues people want to raise. They take place once a month.

We also have sector ‘Toolbox’ meetings, i.e. just for the factory workers, or the delivery drivers or the office staff, where they can go into greater detail, roughly twice a month, about specific ideas or concerns.

We have one-to-one meetings where people can talk about their individual issues or personal development ambitions.

We have also looked at social events outside work, though Covid has restricted this. Because we haven’t been able to hold a Christmas party, we created a hamper for each employee, giving them products of their choice.

This translates into different benefits: not only do staff ideas and problem-solving improve our **productivity**, they make people’s work more fulfilling.

No ‘us’ and ‘them’ culture

For us, having an ‘effective workforce voice’ means having an **inclusive culture**. To quote our managing director John Farley again: “If we want a new machine in the factory,

I would go to the factory and ask them what we should be looking at. I wouldn’t just buy a new machine willy-nilly.

“When we had to change the forklift recently, I discussed it with six people. We found the right solution that works for all of us, and staff feel respected.” This too feeds into staff loyalty and retention.



Mental health awareness

We also see another dimension to ‘giving the workforce an effective voice’, and that’s around people’s personal issues and mental health.

Through the way we behave throughout the company, we’re creating a culture where people open up to each other and where problems are shared, whether or not they relate to the workplace. There are many good reasons to do this, including health and safety, ensuring people can focus on their work, and helping them enjoy work.

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Making work stimulating

Everyone has specific roles in the company, but in the factory, we try to rotate staff in the various disciplines. As well as making their work more interesting, it ensures everyone has an understanding of the various aspects of our work. That way, in the event of staff sickness, it's easy to slot staff into priority roles and tasks.

The benefits

It can be hard to measure precisely the gains achieved from good working practices or 'fair work', but we do see clear benefits:

Loyalty and recruitment: In three years, only two people have left the business, and they've been replaced by two people who used to work here. The local community hears about how we're developing the culture, and that makes it easier to recruit as well as retain staff.

Productivity: During Covid-19, we had to make radical changes in the business, such as introducing online sales; the staff adapted brilliantly.

As a result, in Christmas 2020, we sent out about 15,000 packages and had the best Christmas for 15 years in terms of sales. "I would say the effect of being a good or reasonable employer increased our productivity 100%," says John Farley.

Similarly, in 2021, in our busiest pre-Christmas period, staff members were more than happy to work additional hours to meet demand. This is a true reflection of our culture since all of them have families and giving up their time is significant.

Our fair work journey

Having heard about the Scottish Government's Fair Work principles and action plan and seeing how they fit so well with how we work, we're looking into adopting them on a more formal basis. Being a fair employer, and being recognised for that, will be good for all aspects of running our business.

Where to get advice and support

Talk to your peers. If you have an issue or want to develop best practice, ask them how they tackled it, and what worked or didn't work.

[Skills Development Scotland](#) for advice on workforce development and skills

Scottish Enterprise [Fair Work Employer Support Toolkit](#)

For further information about Apprenticeships click [here](#)

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What is Fair Work?

The Scottish Government's concept of 'Fair Work' is 'work that offers effective voice, respect, security, opportunity and fulfilment'.

In practice, the Scottish Government's [Fair Work First guidance](#) asks businesses to, e.g.:

- Invest in skills and training
- Have an effective workforce voice (this could be through unions but there are other ways too)
- Ensure no inappropriate use of zero hours contracts
- Take action to tackle the gender pay gap
- Pay real living wage

Many food and drink businesses find they are already following Fair Work practices (or are going beyond them) as part of their audits for certification schemes or retail contracts. They're also becoming a requirement for many public sector contracts and grants.