

Case Study

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Macswheen: going back to basics can work wonders

“If we want people in the factory to do something a certain way, we take care to show why. When something makes sense to people, they are more likely to engage with it.”

Alistair Williams
Operations Director



However successful a business, it can benefit from de-constructing the way it does things. At Macswheen, we completely reviewed our operations and culture, and are more productive and resilient as a result.

Macswheen of Edinburgh is a third-generation family business, launched in 1953 as a butcher's shop in Morningside. Our award-winning haggis, vegetarian haggis and black pudding are now sold around the world.

It's a fact of life for every food and drink business, however big or small, that at some point you will face a major challenge. It could be a hike in the price of raw materials or utilities, a quality issue, changes in export regulations, a fire or flood in the factory, or a global pandemic. You must be able to cope with a moving landscape.

Keen that Macswheen should be around for several more generations, we have looked for ways to make the company more agile, efficient and resilient.

A complete review of how we run the business

We began to focus on this around three years ago, and put in place a suite of changes and goals around our management approach, operations and people development.

Key themes are:

Mutual trust and respect: a team should be built on these. A culture where people can ask questions or admit mistakes, and where difficult situations are handled constructively, supports efficiency, productivity, quality and loyalty.

Safe food made safely: that's our mantra, and it makes management and team decisions much easier. If something will help us make safe food safely, it's a positive; if it will hinder that, we shouldn't do it. This can apply to anything from processes to how people behave.

Flattening the structure: rather than layers of supervisors and managers reporting to each other, we want our managers on the shop floor showing people how to work more effectively and listening to any suggestions for improvements.



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Valuing our people: we already pay colleagues more than the national living wage and are on target to be real living wage payers in 2021. We also recognise good work, grow our own talent, train everyone in the factory, offer Modern Apprenticeships and support people when they take on new responsibilities.

The proof is in the pudding – and the haggis

The benefits of our work on resilience were evident during the Covid-19 lockdown. It was a stressful and exhausting time, but our staff knew we were there for them, and they delivered for us.

But long before that, we had seen tangible benefits from reviewing the way we managed the business. In 2017, we were producing just under 550kg of haggis per person per shift. Now we regularly achieve 950kg per person per shift, yet the team say their days are easier. We did this through attention to detail:

- we stepped up on machine maintenance; for example, the team start each day checking the equipment, which reduces the likelihood of interruptions later in the day
- we made a small change to the layout of the factory which accelerated people's work, reduced manual handling, improved traceability and increased productivity
- our work on culture and training improved workforce retention and therefore productivity

All these issues are specific to our own factory, but illustrate a general point: **the value of going back to the basics on operations and company culture.**

Two (or more) heads are better than one

An essential ingredient in our resilience is support. A business of our size, with around 50 employees, cannot navigate challenges such as Covid-19 or Brexit alone.

We get exceptional support the Scotland Food & Drink Partnership, and their guidance on manufacturing requirements and other issues during Covid-19 was a game-changer.

Networking with other businesses is also useful. Sharing experiences and ideas can help you address your own challenges and also open up new marketing or collaboration opportunities – another great way to navigate the ups and downs of business.

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