

The Next Generation—Stimulating an Interest

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How many times have we all heard—where have all the good staff gone? Or, I can't get good people to work for me. This is a situation that we started to address in Blakedown Nurseries in the mid 1980's by upgrading our recruitment. One step was to increase our links with local schools through career talks to classes and hosting visits. Two years ago, after a visit from a local school's Rural Studies Class, a chance idea emerged in conversation with the teacher. Since the students were so keen about growing plants, and as they grew a few at school already, why not grow some on a semi-commercial basis for Blakedown Nurseries? The teacher and the class all seemed to be very enthusiastic about the idea so we decided to give it a try.

The initial meeting between myself and the pupils was to decide which crops the pupils were going to grow and work out a rough format for prices, etc. At this planning stage a number of problems became apparent to the students, because they had no pots, no compost, limited facilities and very little technical skills. Their business acumen was also limited although this soon changed. To provide interest and a challenge I decided that as little as possible would be handed on a plate to them. They would have to purchase or hire materials needed for this project and we would conduct a proper business relationship. By the end of the second meeting, after much serious negotiating, we had agreed to hire them pots, sell them compost for a nominal sum and provide technical skill free of charge so that they could produce a saleable crop to the standards we had agreed upon. By this stage enthusiasm among the students was high, and they had decided on the name of their nursery, which was to be Carolian Plants. They had also designed a logo, produced headed notepaper for their use with us, and had sorted out a management structure among themselves; so when negotiations were occurring they would have nominated people to represent them on various topics.

This was happening in school term time so the scaling of the operation and the crops to be produced had to fit in with the school system. Herbs in 0.5-litre pots were chosen since they are a relatively quick crop, they can also be produced from seed which means there is no need for stock plants, and the end product would be saleable at a much earlier stage than normal hardy nursery stock.

It was now November and everything was set. Carolian Plants, as they are now known, had purchased and sown their seeds and were getting their nursery up and running. Other problems started to emerge—weekend watering, and monitoring temperature and humidity conditions in the small school glasshouse. These problems they overcame exceptionally well. The students formed a voluntary rota system to come in at weekends and the Christmas holidays to tend the plants as necessary.

The first batch of 500 plants was due to be delivered in March—this objective was achieved. From an initial expenditure budget of £35 they had realised a return of £125 in 6 months. This is a sure way to stimulate an interest! This year we have repeated the project and in addition hardwood cuttings were inserted during the

winter. This extra crop has been introduced so that next year's students will have a crop already in the pipeline when they inherit the Carolian Plants project.

An added bonus this year has been the allocation of funds from the school governors for the purchase and construction of a 40-ft poly-tunnel to help expand the container production at the school.

During the growing period, the students were making visits to our nursery to study our techniques. This close contact strengthened our relationship with pupils and staff. During the spring we were getting some requests from students as to whether we had any weekend work available. Enthusiasm was growing! We were able to employ some of them for Saturday morning work, during which we would always make sure they had a supervisor available to give them the necessary help.

By this stage the net result of the exercise was:

- We had introduced a number of young people to hardy nursery stock production
- We had developed a link with the school which has since become very strong and is continuing.
- We had also initiated some potential recruits to our company.

Coupled with this project, we had decided to continue on traditional recruitment avenues—newspaper advertisements and careers evenings. With newspaper advertisements there is very little flexibility, but with the careers evenings we decided to examine what we were doing, make some changes and do some experimenting. We felt these evenings had degenerated, to us sitting behind a table and doing the run of the mill things—like showing videos and handing out pamphlets, and only occasionally getting to speak with potential recruits. We were not achieving our objectives.

The first change we decided on was that I personally would not go to any more careers evenings as I am now too old! Students generally regard anyone over the age of 25 as being ancient, or like their parents. They often relate better with younger people. Now I have a right hand man on recruitment who is 20 years old. He, and our 1st and 2nd year apprentices, with my guidance, now prepare and attend careers evenings and there has been an increase in people who have applied for positions with us as a result. Our apprentices and staff are now a lot more aware of the work needed to recruit the next generation of nurserymen, and the need for careful thought and refinement in recruitment. They also have a lot of fun in planning and executing the careers evenings, which is a great morale booster. Those who are actually chosen to attend the careers evenings look upon it as quite an honour and a perk even though they often have to do it in the evenings.

Now we have reached the stage where we have Saturday people, and applicants from the Careers evenings and newspaper advertisements who are interested in joining our company.

The next stage for recruitment of staff is the interview. The interview at Blakedown is a two stage procedure. Firstly, the applicant comes to visit us at the nursery with their parents or guardians. This is important as we look towards parental support for all of our younger people. During the first meeting I tell them about Blakedown Nurseries and also about the nursery stock industry, our training system and career opportunities. They are then given a guided tour of the nursery by my younger colleague. At the end of the nursery tour I again meet the applicant and his parents and ask if they are interested in a career with Blakedown nurseries. If the answer is no, then obviously everything finishes there. If yes, we agree to

take them on for one week's work trial. At this stage no offer is made of any financial remuneration for the trial week. I only offer them the opportunity to come and work for a week and see what it is like in real life and also to meet the other staff—especially the existing apprentices. We don't want recruits just because our company looks good on the surface. We want to feel that they know a little bit more about the job and the industry so that they can make a valued decision about joining us or not.

When the applicant starts their week's trial they again get a brief look around the nursery to refresh their memory, as it may have been some time since our initial meeting. They are also given an induction form which briefs them on working hours, health and safety topics etc. They are given a programme so that they know exactly what department they are going to be working in each day, and the name of the supervisor. In actual fact it can be quite a challenging week as the applicant will be in a different department each day. However, we feel it is more important that they get variation in their work and see what is going on on the nursery. The final document that they are given is an appraisal form. At the end of each day the person who is supervising the applicant fills it in and also discusses it with them. As each day goes by they know what we think of them. This daily debrief is also an opportunity for us to get feedback from the applicant.

At mid-day on Friday I get the finished appraisal with the comments of the 5 supervisors. Equipped with this information a decision is then made as to whether we want to take the candidate on or not. We then meet with the candidate at 4 p.m. and debrief them—the good points of the week, the bad points—what they liked and didn't like. We then invite them to tell us whether they would like a full time position with us as an apprentice or whether it is not the life they hoped it would be. If at this stage they are interested in continuing their career with us and we have decided we want them—then we would offer a full time job. If they decide that they don't want to stay then we part company on good terms. If they decide they want to stay, but the majority of my supervisors have not found that person is right for the company then we regretfully inform them we will not be able to offer a position. Irrespective of the outcome of their interview we now pay the applicant for their week's work, even though they have not expected this.

Though this may sound a long-winded process we have found that this system has resulted in us achieving very good quality and committed recruits. It also ensures the total involvement not only of my senior staff, but also all of our junior management, since they are involved in the recruitment and final decision making process. This year, out of our five new apprentices, three are from the Carolan Plants project, one from a careers evening and one from an advertisement. Over the past 3 years, out of a total of 23 apprentices being recruited by this system we still have 20 in our employment, and they have proved to be very good apprentices.