Tech advances ‘will attract fresh talent’ to fresh produce

The rise of automation, robotics, AI and big data is creating opportunities to welcome the brightest young minds into the industry, say Britain’s leading fresh produce companies. Fred Searle reports from The Fresh Careers Fair

There is no major shortage of skilled young people joining the fresh produce industry, but more could be done to attract the best young talent as technological advances create new job opportunities in the sector.

That was the message from exhibitors at The Fresh Careers Fair in London on 13 March, who spoke of the need to make graduates and other candidates aware of the wide range of career opportunities in the fresh produce sector.

“The horticulture and agriculture industries haven’t been the sexiest for the past ten to 15 years and employees have been ageing but companies are making a few changes now,” said Vitacress’ head of horticulture John Benfield.

“We’re going through quite an exciting time with automation, robotics, AI, big data and sensors. AI and big data are a bit beyond me at the moment but getting people into your business who can make the most of these new opportunities and take the right decisions will be key going forward.”

Also exhibiting at the event for the fresh produce, food retail, foodservice and hospitality sectors, recipe box scheme HelloFresh stressed that it needs people who know how to analyse and use data.

Companies like ours – that use a lot of data to make decisions – need people, not just in data roles but in all roles, to be able to analyse and use data. If any applicant for any role at HelloFresh could show they’d used Tableau or Microsoft Excel to analyse some data, that’d be a big plus.

To attract this kind of talent, fresh produce firms need to make young graduates aware not only of the more technical roles that are available, but also of their companies’ very existence.

Events like The Fresh Careers Show, which attracted around 1,000 visitors and 35 exhibitors, are not only an important way of linking students and employers, but also of letting people know what fresh produce companies do.

“As a company, we’re very well known in the industry but outside of it nobody knows who we are because
It can also be difficult to attract graduates due to competition from other sectors, he added. "The banks and some of the other big companies outside fresh produce are offering higher starting salaries and really good packages so most students look to them first," he explained.

"When most students are at uni I don't think they really consider the fresh produce industry unless they're doing a food science degree or something like that."

Despite these challenges, Melissa Bowcock, senior HR business partner at BerryWorld, said there's no shortage of young people coming into the business.

"We're seeing some really good talent coming through our graduate programmes and working in our office," she reported.

"We're not struggling, we're still finding lots of brilliant young people. We're more concerned for our growers and their workforce but we know that everyone's going to be in the same boat."

Reflecting on the labour challenges facing growers, which have been intensified by Brexit, Fresca chairman Chris Mack said the cost and availability of labour will continue to drive more interest and investment in robotics.

"This has boosted demand for robotics and Mack said he's now seeing "almost a shortage" of resource at robotics suppliers "because suddenly everybody's interested."

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