

## CASE STUDY

# Innovation is the Carrot that Leads to Success



### Business Profile

**Company:** E Cook and Sons

**Location:** St Helens, Merseyside

**Established:** 1976

**Sector:** Food and Drink

**Type of Business:** Grower and producer of vegetables and cereal

**No of employees:** 20

E Cook and Sons is a family business which grows carrots, potatoes, brussel sprouts and cereals over 900 acres at Windle Hall Farm, in St Helens. The company, founded by Edward and Kathleen Cook in 1976, is now run by their sons Geoff and David, along with David's wife Joan and their son Stephen. As well as growing crops, the company also processes them onsite, before selling them on to markets and greengrocers across Merseyside and the United Kingdom.

Producing the highest quality vegetables and cereals is top of the company's agenda and it is used to facing challenges in its industry, such as poor weather conditions. E Cook and Sons has remained successful by adopting an innovative approach to overcoming them.

### Growing in the Right Direction

The company was introduced to Business Link Northwest Food and Drink Adviser Philip Ambler by Jonathan Jackson, of the Integrated Countryside and Environment Project (ICEP), while it was making a bid for funding from a programme that existed at the time.

Philip says: "When I first came into contact with Stephen Cook it became clear that development was high on the company's agenda. Together with ICEP, I supported him while he made several successful funding bids which allowed the company to improve their processes and expand and move forward."

# SUPPORTING NORTH WEST BUSINESSES



“Our Adviser understood what we were trying to achieve so we knew we could trust the advice that we gave us.”

**Stephen Cook**  
E Cook and Sons

## Funding for the Future

Since then Philip has been a key source of information and guidance as Stephen and the family strove to drive the business forward. Innovation and development have remained important to the company and Philip has continued to play a part in helping to bring their plans to fruition.

Stephen, a Director at E Cook and Sons, says: “When the price of carrots dropped dramatically in 2009 due to more suppliers entering the market, we needed to give ourselves a competitive edge by offering produce that was produced efficiently and to a high standard. To do this we needed to embark on a project to ensure we had the latest and best technology.”

To give it the edge it was seeking, E Cook and Sons needed to put in place a piece of equipment that could sort carrots very effectively, allowing it to remove more defective carrots at a faster pace, increasing the amount of saleable crop produced. E Cook and Sons also needed to replace existing equipment and put plans in place to increase the size of the packing house, to keep the company at the top of its game.

Stephen turned to Philip for guidance with a bid for funding from the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE), to support the project. Philip delivered advice to Stephen as he put together a business case for the funding to help ensure he had everything in place and a strong application.

Stephen said: “Philip was incredibly helpful and has the experience and expertise to provide very sound guidance on funding applications. He understood what we were trying to achieve so we knew we could trust the advice that he gave us.”

The company was awarded a grant from the RDPE of 40 per cent of the cost of the £250,000 project. The new sorting machine has been put in place and the further elements of the project are due to happen in the near future.

## Leading from the Front

Sales and marketing are also very important to E Cook and Sons and Stephen is keen to develop his skills in this area so that he can ensure that the quality vegetables they produce are snapped up in the market place.

He says: “You can produce the best vegetables in the world but you also need to be able to market and sell them effectively. We are doing a good job of ensuring our sales remain good, but I know they can be even better and my skills in the sales and marketing department is key to realising our potential.”

Philip has introduced Stephen to the Business Link Train to Gain: Leadership and Management Advisory Service and he will be working with a Leadership and Management Adviser to identify what sales and marketing training is available to hone his skills. Philip says: “The Train to Gain: Leadership and Management Advisory Service provides funding towards the cost of training for business owners and senior managers and E Cook and Sons could really benefit from an investment in Stephen’s skills.

“We have also been looking at doing some market research with the Kent Business School and leadership and management training for Stephen will help E Cook and Sons to get the most value out of this. E Cook and Sons is a company that has been around for quite a while but is keen to secure a successful future and we are here to support it in all its endeavours.”



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