



Vitacress

Maintenance management excellence assures 'fast and cool' operations

Background

In 2006, the Vitacress factory at Andover was named the Zurich Best Factory of the Year at the annual Best Factory Awards Ceremony – the Oscars for British manufacturers. Only those enterprises with pioneering work practices stand a cat's chance of being a contender at this event. Vitacress not only clinched the top prize, but flattened their rivals in other manufacturing sectors by also scooping up no less than three other prestigious awards – all after an intense competition when every part of the business came under minute scrutiny.

Vitacress is Europe's leading grower and packer of ready-to-eat watercress, rocket and baby leaf salads. Vitacress has a vertically integrated operation - growing, bagging and distributing its own produce. The entire process from harvest to delivery must be managed as a cold-chain with strict controls on humidity and processing time. Typically, Vitacress has just 24 hours to get the leaves picked from the field onto the supermarket shelves - in

which time they must be transported, inspected, washed, dried, packed, weighed, sealed, check-weighed, palletted and delivered. The company's mantra is "keep it cold – move it fast".

Needs

Working to such compressed timescales, plant breakdowns don't just cost money but, more crucially, threaten vital supply contracts with major supermarkets and Vitacress' reputation as the pre-eminent European supplier.

To assure a top quality consumer experience, whilst maintaining high operating efficiencies, Vitacress' processing plant is necessarily high tech. Eggs are fragile but, compared to delicate baby salad leaves, they are positively armour-plated! Vitacress decided best practice equipment maintenance was a prerequisite for business success and that a computerised maintenance management system was an essential means of its achievement.

Solution

Vitacress first recognised the importance of plant maintenance some ten years ago - that was when the FrontLine maintenance management system was first installed. Since then, Vitacress has continued to use evolving versions of Shire's FrontLine software.

FrontLine is a suite of integrated modules with the core module, Maintenance Management, controlling asset care and repair. This module keeps a register of all maintenance-demanding items, manages planned maintenance schedules and keeps a log of all events, including unplanned, corrective tasks. Additional modules are available for the management of materials, finances, labour and work requesting, as well as mobile extensions with barcode readers for a completely paper-free system. FrontLine's adaptable capability allows it to respond to different business models and changing priorities with ease.

FrontLine straightforwardly builds a maintenance plan and history for each

◀ Farm to fork in just over 24 hours



Paul Walsham, the man responsible for keeping the wheels turning at Andover



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maintainable asset. At Vitacress, these are comprised of washing and packing conveyors, optical sorters, centrifuges, weighing equipment, vertical form fill and seal systems, date printers and the compressed air system. Also included are the transport fleet and - those easy to overlook showstoppers - automatic doors.

Responsibility for keeping the Vitacress wheels turning and lines moving rests with Engineering Manager, Paul Walsham. “We use FrontLine to log and track all maintenance inspections and tasks, as well as the cost of labour and spares. Input fault-codes, such as bearing problems, mean that we can follow the trail of faults on each machine.”

Benefits

Walsham maintains: “If we didn't have FrontLine, it would be like going back into the Dark Ages.” He manages a team of 17 engineers, all trained to use the FrontLine system. “FrontLine is as important to us as spreadsheets are to Accounts. It gives us the

visibility and traceability to successfully complete the BRC (British Retail Consortium) and ISO 14001 audits. Without these, we would not be able to secure and maintain our major contracts.”

FrontLine's practical usefulness is enhanced by its ability to provide crucial management reports. Walsham uses FrontLine to audit the planned maintenance schedules as well as produce graphs showing every reactive and planned job over a period. These are used by Vitacress' Mission-Directed Work Teams to continually monitor and assess the performance of the maintenance teams. “Currently, we are working to a target ratio of 3:1. Being able to accurately measure the ratio of planned to unplanned tasks means we can manage our maintenance to reduce the number of reactive jobs - which keeps unplanned down-time to a minimum.”

The effectiveness of FrontLine at Andover prompted Vitacress to extend its use to their Portuguese factory. From here, Vitacress serves

the Iberian market, where it is the leader in own-brand bagged salads.

Future plans

Constantly working to super-fast deadlines in a highly competitive market, Vitacress is continually searching for an additional competitive edge and is already working on the next process improvements. The engineering team at Vitacress, helped by FrontLine, are central to Vitacress' continuing ability to provide the winning innovations keeping them ahead of their rivals - and set for the next industry award!

Insight

Vitacress has adopted an integrated and holistic approach to managing the business. People, technology and innovative thinking have been brought together in an inspired way to deliver outstanding success. At Vitacress, maintenance is not treated as Cinderella at production's Ball – the crucial, value-adding contribution of maintenance has been fully recognised and Paul Walsham and his team have risen to the challenge.