

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER PARTNERSHIPS CASE STUDY:

Rebecca Smith | Valley Produce Ltd



About Me:

Before the KTP I was an undergraduate at the University of Nottingham where I also completed my PhD in Food and Plant Sciences.



Project duration: 2 years

End date 05/01/2016

How did you initially hear about the opportunity of becoming a KTP Associate?

I was looking for jobs after I finished my PhD on jobs.ac.uk, and found this opportunity quite by chance. I actually didn't realise it was a KTP until I came for the interview after initially being attracted by the work side of it, so when I learnt of the other benefits such as the research elements, the academic connections, and the whole support structure, all these became very attractive bonuses to accompany the position. I didn't want to stay in academia, but I also didn't want to lose that aspect completely, so getting both academia and industry experience in one role was perfectly suited for me.

Please could you provide a summary of the project, and what your role was?

The Project was to develop a new product which utilises the waste that farms produce. Valley Produce is predominately a herb farm and about 40% of what we farm is wasted at harvest. This could be because it's not the right size, or that inclement weather has decimated the herb, but if the quality wasn't right we couldn't sell it to our customers. We wanted to see if we could use that waste to create a new product that could be sold alongside our fresh produce.

How did you find the support once the partnership began?

The support was great, and it was an incredible help that all partners were so engaged in the project. Everyone shared a responsibility as well as a communal goal, so Valley Produce, the University and the supervisors were always readily available to provide support to me whenever I needed it.

How did the triangular relationship between the business, the University, and yourself result in being a key factor in your development?

The KTC at Reading University was fantastic and were very good in getting in contact with all the partners when it came to things such as the LMCs. My Academic Supervisor was also brilliant, as were Valley Produce Ltd, so the communication was always excellent and everyone worked tirelessly as a team.

What impact could you see on the company as a direct result of your role as the KTP Associate?

It was actually quite late on in the second year of the project when I started to notice an impact as a direct result of the work I was doing. The first year and a half my work was mostly exploratory; we spent a lot of time researching technology which would be applicable to the process to then take into trial runs. With the success of that we started producing samples and speaking to customers about the company's products, so at that point it became clear to me that what we were doing was really going somewhere and the business was on the verge of changing. We created a product as a direct result of the two year KTP project

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which we know will sell and we know we can produce. The challenge now is dealing with the capital costs, and that is being tackled as we speak. I'm confident the product will be on the market in the next couple of years.

What did you see as being the key successes to the project?

The successful development of the product really has been key, so opening up the access to funding and business advice through the knowledge transfer network and Innovate UK was fundamental. The network of other KTP Associates during the project was also a really key part for me personally, and I am still in touch with a couple of people from the residential management courses from year one. Building and retaining a network of people in any form is hugely beneficial, but especially so with other like-minded Associates who although may not be working in the same industry are still going through the same experience that you are and are able to offer help and advice whenever you need it, which I'd likewise offer to them.

Please could you describe the other benefits of becoming an Associate, especially with regard to after the project had finished?

To have that bridging gap between the University and the company is a huge benefit; you get to learn more and more every day from both the corporate and the academic side, so fusing such vast amounts of valuable knowledge from such extensive levels of expertise. Additionally, I had developed quite a broad knowledge of project management from the completion of my PhD, but becoming an Associate provided me with the skills and the support to actually bring this into practice in every day working life. Being an Associate built my confidence through working with customers, business advisors, researchers and colleagues at the University and Valley Produce. I learnt a whole new skillset outside of my academic training which has helped me now I work for Valley full time.

How do you think being employed under the partnership would differ from a standard post-graduate employment?

Still having a level of contact with the University is a really big difference and a huge benefit when part of a KTP. Going straight from academia to industry you won't have that research side of things and your employment would be more corporate, industry focussed. With a KTP you get a halfway house; you have the benefits of the University's research, the focus on innovation, and the knowledge of the Academics, but you also get to learn first-hand what it's like to work in the industry where the predominate focus is to get a turnover each day.

What challenges did you face during your time as an Associate and what did you, the company, or UoR do to help you overcome these to ensure continued success within the KTP project?

The biggest challenge for me was when one of the Academics of my project left the University of Reading and took a job in Ireland. Although this seemed cataclysmic to me at the time, we focussed on how we could still make this work and did so effectively and efficiently. We felt it best not to disrupt the KTP by looking at bringing a new replacement Academic on board, so instead I travelled to Ireland to work in the labs there and we had frequent Skype calls so the Academic was still very much involved. We also faced an issue when the labs at the University were refurbished, but again the support of the KTC meant we were able to find temporary labs for me to work in, and when we got back into the University's the new refurbishment meant they were top of the range and an even better location for my research, so it all worked out well. These were the two main challenges I faced, but both 'hiccups' were managed really well and didn't cause anywhere near the disruption they potentially could have done.

You had £2k each year to spend on your own personal career development; what was the most beneficial use and outcome for you?

The budget was incredibly useful; I predominately spent this on courses which were applicable to my role and helped me develop

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greatly. This included Level 4 Food Safety and Manufacturing, HACCP Training, and I also attended a conference in Malaysia where I was able to absorb knowledge from other people in similar industries and further enhance my industry network. I also utilised the budget to visit my Academic Supervisor in Ireland after she moved which was key to a continued fluidity of the KTP. The good thing for me was that although the support was there and I could (and did) ask for assurance with my choices, it was up to me to find the courses that I felt would be best for me and which paths would better place me to ensure the success of the project. Both the company and the University put that trust in me and my choices, which I both appreciated and ensured I capitalised on, and now am in a better position for it.

What happened at the end of your KTP, and what has happened since?

We discussed my position quite early on and as a result of my hard work and dedication to the business a role was created for me which I gratefully accepted. This was to develop the product further, but also to take on a technical role, which entailed managing the general work that goes on in the pack-house, overseeing the compliance standards and safety aspects. We as a business have also attended quite a few innovate events, we've been able to start sending out samples of our new products, and I've also been able to continue my learning after the project ended, especially on the business side.

Would you recommend KTP to other graduates? If so, why?

I would definitely recommend KTP to other graduates. To echo my earlier points, you get all the experience you may need in an industry all the while with the continued support from the Knowledge Transfer Centre and the shared expertise from the University. The development budget is also a huge asset and the training you can get from that to aid your personal growth puts you in such a great position for your future, which is something you simply wouldn't get through other avenues of employment.

What one piece of advice would you give to a graduate considering KTP?

The best piece of advice I could give would be to apply. Talk to the Knowledge Transfer Centre as they have a huge amount of expertise and advice they can share about the project and what it would entail, and if you feel that you have the right skills then definitely apply. It could, as it did for me, work out to be the best career move you can possibly do.