

Featured interview >>

DAVID WILKINSON, HR DIRECTOR AT PREMIER FOODS



Unlocking People Potential at Premier Foods

Following its successful re-financing in 2014, together with the creation of the Hovis Limited Joint Venture, Premier Foods Human Resources Director, David Wilkinson, takes time to tell Nigel Wright why the business is now a great place for people looking to develop a rewarding career in the food industry. >>



You've been with Premier Foods for almost eight years. How has the organisation changed in that time?

We've been through a fairly well documented set of challenges in recent years. The company grew rapidly through acquisition in the 2000s financed with significant bank debt. We spent a number of years integrating these acquisitions but ultimately ran into some difficulties due to deteriorating trading

conditions. To help pay down our debt we then divested a number of brands and businesses as we started to focus on a smaller number of key brands.

Since Gavin Darby, our current CEO, took over two years ago, the business has stabilised and is now on a much sounder footing. We restructured our balance sheet and forged a Joint Venture with The Gores Group for our Hovis business, and we developed a clear strategy and a coherent organisation structure. It's a smaller organisation than in the past but one that's much better positioned for success.

You were appointed HR Director in April 2014, what were your immediate priorities?

The first thing we did was to map out a much clearer people strategy and start reinvesting in the HR function to help us deliver that.

We've hired great people into key Resourcing, Training, and Talent roles so we now have more capacity and capability to do some really interesting things. Our generalist HR teams are aligned to our Business Unit structure, as well as the central functions. The three year people strategy that we developed is aligned to our strategic growth plan and consistent with our new company vision, purpose and values that we also developed last year.

What are those values?

We have five; We Aim Higher, We Champion Fresh Ideas, We are Agile, We are United, and We Respect and Encourage One Another.



David Wilkinson

We thought carefully about what our Values would be. We wanted them to be meaningful, representative of the entire business, and distinct to Premier Foods. We talked to lots of our people at all levels to arrive at the five Values, and they have been received really well.

The Values embody what it is like to work at Premier, and how we want to behave in future. It's really important to us that our people feel valued and respected, at all levels. We work quickly, and you don't have to go through layers to get decisions made, people here are very accountable. Innovation and creativity are important as we look to grow our established brands into new areas, and stretching ourselves is vital if we are to achieve our ambitions. Finally, we'll not achieve any of this

if the business doesn't work together, so we have to be joined together at all times across all parts of the organisation.

Now that they're finalised, how have you gone about communicating these Values to the Group?

During the summer members of the leadership team visited each of our sites to talk to colleagues about the Values and the importance of them to the business.

This was a really valuable process, which resulted in us making a number of changes to the messages that we were trying to communicate. It showed we are a business that is prepared to listen to its people and adapt our plans if necessary.

We then held a conference in September, where we talked to people about the values, the people strategy and our new organisational structure. We then went out again to communicate all of this to an even wider audience. I'm really proud that we did - this level of engagement is important to us and we want to help people to understand how Premier Foods is changing, and is now a far more transparent and open organisation.

What are the implications of the most recent organisational restructure at Premier Foods with regards talent attraction and retention?

Last autumn we announced that the business would be organised into three Strategic Business Units or SBUs – Grocery, Sweet



Treats, and International. These units have more control over the full span of their business which has improved accountability and is designed to accelerate our rate of innovation and growth.

As part of this move, we decided to invest more in critical functions including marketing, sales and innovation to help strengthen our capabilities. We have some really exciting roles, across all disciplines and at all levels with lots of potential. For the right people, there is the opportunity to progress to being part of the Executive team for each of the business units.

The benefit of this structure is that you have the opportunity to really make your mark within a specific area, whilst at the same being part of the wider Group. This obviously gives better career opportunities, and people can move cross functionally as well as between the respective business units.

Would you agree that 'people' are very much at the centre of Premier Foods now?

Absolutely – we've made a really good start. There is appetite for change, and the leadership of the business is completely behind the people strategy.

"We have ambitious plans and we are looking for people who enjoy broad challenges, have a real passion for the brands, are not phased by making big decisions, and can work at pace."

For example, we recently launched a 360 feedback programme for our senior leaders, with coaching and support to help them develop. We've also enhanced our maternity and paternity provision and we have awarded every permanent employee in the business 500 free shares. This latter move has gone down extremely well as colleagues feel more involved as part owners of the company and can benefit from our future success.

You've committed to running an all employee survey again in 2015. How do you feel people will react to this?

I would hope that, on the whole, people will recognise the changes in the business compared to the last employee survey that we ran. We've been through a lot of change which can be unsettling. But we have communicated in an open way and I believe that people who work here feel passionate about Premier Foods.

How challenging do you find it to recruit talented people into Premier Foods?

The challenge is more about recruiting the right talent. We have ambitious plans and we are looking for people who enjoy broad challenges, have a real passion for the brands, are not phased by making big decisions, and can work at pace. We need special people.

Of course, the changes I have talked about – whether that is the new structure, new Values, or the investment in people – are all designed to make Premier Foods a more attractive place for great people to develop their careers. And we're now seeing a definite improvement in our retention levels and our ability to attract

high calibre individuals. People are starting to understand that they can develop a career here, and that the business rewards and recognises people who deliver results and have the right behaviours.

In your opinion, what's the best thing about working for Premier Foods? What's your favourite Premier Foods brand?



The reason I've enjoyed working at Premier Foods is because of the huge variety in what I do. The different roles, projects and experiences I've had in the last seven years would take so much longer to gain in other organisations.

Naturally, I love all of our brands, but I do think the Lloyd Grossman cooking sauces are absolutely fabulous, particularly chilli con carne. All of our cooking sauces are a real family favourite in the Wilkinson household and my daughter, Lucy, who has just gone to university, has a plentiful supply in her student flat.

What keeps you busy outside of work?

Well, I am married with two teenage children. Football is a real passion and I spend my weekends either following West Bromwich Albion, home and away, or watching my son, James, play in a local Sunday league. I'm reasonably active too, I do a bit of running and I like to cycle.