

West Cheshire Business Insider

Talking Skills with Forrester's



Heidi Dilliway-Nickson -
Director

What is the history of Forrester's? How did it begin and how has the business got to where it is today?

Forrester's was established in 1970 by my father, who is now retired. To begin with he traded raw chickens to the local markets. Back then we were based up in Norley and we moved to Kingsley in 1996. Kingsley is a village between Frodsham and Northwich. We have changed quite a lot since the beginning in that now we mainly cook chicken. We have 3 ovens and we cook 50 tonnes of chicken a day, mostly chicken thighs, drumsticks and fillet and we pack them up for mainly the discount supermarkets, for example, Aldi and Lidl. So it's fresh cooked chicken. Frozen chicken used to be the bread and butter of our business but this has now changed considerably. The business is still family owned, though the day to day running is done by myself, my brother (Angus Dilliway) and our Sales Director Tim Diggle.

We've expanded a great deal in the past 3/4 years; turnover is just under £50 million at the moment. It was £41 million the previous year and £33 million the year before that. We've grown to the size we want to be now, and we project more organic growth of the next few years.

So what exactly are you doing here? Do you get in live chickens and kill them or is it simply cooking?

We cook, package and distribute chicken. All the chicken that comes into the factory is fully plucked and cleaned out just like you'd see at a butcher's shop. We also buy in parts so we buy drumsticks, fillets or thighs: we don't chop any of our own stuff up anymore. Once we've got the raw chicken in we then load it into trays and then onto trollies which we wheel into the ovens. Next we cook it for an hour, remove from oven, chill and then place it into trays and package it up ready for selling.



How many staff do you have at Forresters and what are their different job roles?

We have 185 staff and the work here is mainly production operative work, so mostly low or unskilled roles. This work involves loading chicken portions onto trolleys or unloading, packing the chicken into trays, putting the trays into boxes, and loading or unloading the vehicles.

Of course as well as these roles we also have a variety of supervisors, line leaders and managers, and we also have an accounts department, a sales department and buying and programming. These jobs are obviously much more skilled.

What jobs/skills do you see yourself needing more of moving forward?

For us really we just need more people with the skills to work in production. I'm looking for apprentices to train up to fill this gap but I want them at 16-18 years ideally. I want the people who don't want to go to college – or for whom sitting behind a desk is not in their future. For example I interviewed a lad today and he's been at college for the better part of a year but he hates it: he's going to join us, start at the bottom and hopefully work his way up. Here I'm not looking for high flyers who are going to get great A level results and be rocket scientists, I'm looking for people who have potential and want to work,


but in a more practical sense. One thing we've done quite successfully is encouraging our staff to work their way up the businesses with us. We don't parachute people in from outside so all the guys in the sales office started on the production floor, the same with programming and accounts. Hopefully our staff can see there's somewhere for them to go and to grow.

This means also that these teams work well with the factory because they've been there and there is no "them and us" between different workers.



Have you taken on apprentices?

We have, we started last year. Until then I thought apprenticeships were only for plumbers or tradesmen but once I found out that you could do an apprenticeships in production work or warehousing I was very keen to take apprentices on. While we have been growing we've really struggled to recruit locally. It's easy to find staff from the EU, who are great, but finding local people who want to work here has been more challenging. Therefore, to me, apprenticeships are a great way to get local young people into the business.



Having decided we wanted apprentices, we researched all the apprenticeships and we got lots of training providers in to decide who we'd go with. It wasn't easy to get my head around it at the beginning to be honest, but now it's all set up it's really easy!

How many apprentices have you taken on and how are they doing now?

So far we have taken on 2 apprentices: Perry in production and Ben in warehousing. My staff were very sceptical at the beginning but after a month they all started embracing it. I think at the beginning they looked on the apprentices as children, I mean at 16 they still pretty much are children really and this put my staff off. This has changed as they've got to know the apprentices, they've warmed to them and helped them learn how to cultivate a good work ethos - that you have to come in everyday, no matter what and not let your colleagues down.

We started our apprentices on a higher wage than the minimum apprentice wage as that is very low - they started on around £4.60. But once they proved themselves we thought that as they were doing the same jobs as their colleagues they should be paid the same as their colleagues so our 17 year old apprentices are now on £7.80 per hour which is a great wage to be earning at that age! I want them to stay for as long as they want to stay with us which is why I pay them so well. The apprentices started in July last year and in January this year Perry was made employee of the month because he's done so well! Watching them improve has been really rewarding.

So you're positive about the scheme?

Yes! I feel massive good will towards this apprenticeship scheme, it's been much better than I thought it would be. We are actively looking for up to 8 more apprentices to take on as soon as possible. Mostly they will be working in production but we might take one apprentice on in the engineering department if there's any interest.

Have you found any problems with the apprenticeship scheme?

We've had a couple of small problems such as one apprentice not getting on with her tutor but, to be honest, the only real problem I have is not being able to find enough apprentices to recruit!

“The apprenticeship scheme has been much better than I thought it would be”

So, how has working with a training provider been in general?

It's been fine. I mean, working with a training provider can be challenging, but the lads doing their apprenticeships seem to be getting on with it and that's going well. Training providers in general

don't seem to be great at recruiting candidates so I think businesses running apprenticeships do have to put in some extra work there to get young people in.

Have you been going into schools to try and recruit? How have you found that, easy?

It's been really hard to get into local schools actually. I really wish there was more help to do it because we are here, we will do anything for them! We'll sponsor them, we'll help them, we'll come and talk to them, and we'll do careers advice, anything really! I've been talking to other companies too and they say the same, why don't schools use us more as a resource - it's such a shame. I am a Governor at Hartford High School, so have been able to do a presentation there, and also Helsby High work reasonably closely with local employers. Something I think would be very useful is a morning meeting with schools and businesses so we could find a way to connect with more schools directly. One thing I would say is that I don't think the schools are embracing apprenticeships I really don't. In my opinion some young people are better suited to an apprenticeship scheme to further their education rather than traditional 6th form, but I sense some reluctance from the high school teachers to embrace this with the same enthusiasm. I wonder if they think the kids are being exploited – which really is not the case.

So far what have you been doing when you go into schools?

When I go into schools I normally do a very quick 7 minute presentation with lots of pictures of chickens, our customers and my staff and then basically say here I am, please consider coming to work for me! I would love to have some open days here so more potential apprentices could see the factory if anyone was interested.



Do you offer work experience?

Yes, we've not done it before but have 4 students coming in next week from Helsby High. Due to my extra links with Hartford High, I've got quite a few guys coming to work for us over the summer and on Saturdays too which is great as they will have a good idea of what's going on here and might apply for apprenticeships later.

“Join our apprenticeship scheme. We will find your true potential if you let us”