SUSTAINING FOOD MANUFACTURING

Objective

To ensure the survival of a major cohort of small to medium sized food manufacturers through a targeted skills intervention aimed at senior management.

Background

This suite of projects – conducted over the last three years – is largely drawing to a close. There has been good uptake by industry on using the resulting tools and models and interest remains strong. It will remain a key component of future business skills projects by AgriFood and other industry stakeholders including governments, peaks, associations, RTOs and climate change consultants. The outputs and data will enhance further skills interventions in regional Australia and in terms of skill needs analysis generally.

The main projects were:

- A series of national seminars and diagnostics workshops
- Carbon Proof workforce development tools (online)
- The pilot Sustainability Essentials for Executives course
- Design of a new qualification to support the Carbon Farming Initiative

In 2010, AgriFood initiated a broad sustainability project, to assist SME food processors’ preparedness for meeting sustainability challenges, with a focus on work force development and skilling requirements. These enterprises are least well connected to and funded by existing government support programs, while also being the most vulnerable as energy prices and market pressures increasingly bare down upon them. No programs specifically support the food manufacturing sector to meet this challenge which puts them at risk.

The first component of the sustainability project was a business/green skills needs analysis followed by a sustainability seminar, conducted in each of the states over the eighteen months from June 2010. The second component of the sustainability project called the “Carbonproof” Project has produced a range of materials in a “tool kit” for assisting plants prepare for the energy and carbon challenges facing companies. This was funded under the WIP program in 2009/10 - and created through working intensely with a group of food manufacturers.

The seminars and the ‘Carbonproof’ initiative combined, confirmed that industry needed better mentoring, support for diagnosing ways to measure and reduce their carbon footprints, and more strategic input. It is most evident that cultural change and issues around work force development were the critical stumbling blocks to success in this arena – and the least well catered for, or understood. There are many formal courses on offer, development programs and technical workshops at both the VET and higher education levels which
focus on certain aspects of sustainability. However, AgriFood has demonstrated that there is no course focused exclusively on leaders and owners of SME food processors – where the success or failure of industry sustainability initiatives are ultimately determined – and which is tailored to their specific needs.

Consequently AgriFood conducted a pilot program design and delivery of the SEE program, supervised by AgriFood and subcontracted to the University of Western Sydney in partnership with Energetics Pty Ltd – a leading climate change consulting group. It was able to create a unique fusion of University level management theory with the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system’s capacity to ensure people have the right skills to do their jobs effectively.

**Outcomes**

- AgriFood developed and tested a model which puts WFD into harness to solve concrete business problems – culminating in the Sustainability Essentials for Executives or ‘SEE‘ program. This unique people-focused approach fuses VET competencies with management school theory & strategy to get quick results for struggling food manufacturers.

- Over 600 food companies contacted with over 150 enterprises participating in major parts of the full suite of projects. The tools developed and broad approach demonstrated has been adopted by some State Governments, is being adapted to other Agrifood sectors and the broader food processing industry is looking to try to adapt is approach for roll-out to the industry in general

- The SEE and Carbonproof project were recognised as ‘beacon’ projects by independent evaluators of the Workforce Innovation Program which provided the source funding.

**Testimonial from a company CEO participant in the SEE pilot program:**

“Just thought I’d give you an update post program. I was quite invigorated again after the course last year and wanted to make sure that my renewed enthusiasm didn’t get lost in the usual day to day. So I briefed all the company involved in thinking about improvements to our processes and how this had to have a positive environmental impact as well as a positive financial impact….. We ended up reviewing our entire plant and the way we operate.

We then applied for and were successful in obtaining roughly half a million dollars in federal government funds under the Ausindustry program. We are committing more than one million dollars to this program ourselves on top ..... We are introducing a number of new technologies and some of these I don’t think have ever been used before in Australia. .... Every person in the company has been briefed about what we are doing and why, and they are all really engaged and committed to this. It’s all rather exciting. At the end of the day lower waste is lower wasted profit (that’s my business hat). So guys thought I’d give you this feed-back so you hear about the positive changes that occur when you get the decision makers into a course such as SEE.”

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