

Bothaville
FREE STATE

Yukon Farms: cultivating its biggest asset

Invest in your staff. This is the message of Yukon Farms' managing director **Gottlieb Venter**. And he should know – not only is Yukon Farms the biggest exporter of root vegetables in the country, but motivates its employees by paying their wages according to their productivity and involves labour in management. **Annelie Coleman** reports.

YUKON FARMS IS ONE OF THE FREE State's best-kept secrets. Not only is it the largest exporter of root vegetables in SA, but it's also one of the largest employers of farmworkers in the province. "The most gratifying part of our business is the development of people, not only for the benefit of the company, but to see them astonished by the realisation of their own potential," says Yukon managing director Gottlieb Venter.

Yukon's farms are situated on the banks of the Vals River outside Bothaville and employ over 400 people. Active worker participation in all spheres of management plays a pivotal role. Gottlieb emphasises the importance of the workers' contribution

to the success of the enterprise. "We could never have achieved the levels of success we are enjoying now without the dedication and loyalty of our workforce. Everyone on these farms takes ownership for his or her contribution and responsibility towards sustainability and profitability," he says.

Up to 130t of six varieties of baby root vegetables are cultivated, harvested and packaged for export per month. The products are packaged in 22 different types of packaging, all destined for overseas markets.

Motivating a winning workforce

"None of this is possible without the commitment of a dedicated workforce,"

Gottlieb says. "The employees are motivated by the fact that their wages are determined by their own productivity. Employees in the packhouse, for example, can earn as much as R120 per day."

Several years ago management decided to involve labour in the management structures. As a result a large number of management positions are filled by previous workers. "It's not only a sound business practice, but a moral obligation," Gottlieb says. "Workers have already been appointed in positions such as production manager, dispatch manager, harvest manager and agronomic manager." Over the years labour representation on Yukon Farms has moved away from the traditional "shop steward"

There's no glass ceiling for Yukon Farms' workers. The management structure involves them in decisions and gives them chances for promotion.

PHOTOS: ANNELIE COLEMAN



1. Agronomic manager Pux Molotsoane is responsible for planting on Yukon Farms. He loves the land, and now has the opportunity of living his dreams of being a farmer and earning enough to provide properly for his family.

2. Jacob Mofokeng, Yukon Farms' production manager, says control, communication and leadership are automatically followed by commitment from subordinates.

3. The development of farmworkers is not only a sound business practice, but is also a moral imperative, says Gottlieb Venter, Yukon Farms' MD. The company's dispatch manager, Ntaeleng Leanya, agrees and is thankful for the opportunities she has had to achieve professional success.



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- SA's largest root vegetable exporter attributes its success to investment in staff.
- Labour is being promoted into management.
- Education, skills development and training courses bring huge rewards.

committees to management committees. Gottlieb firmly believes in co-responsibility and says it took hard work and motivation to get the relationship on a positive footing.

"It encourages participation and trust between workers and management," Gottlieb says. "It was, however, not an easy road and it took a lot of commitment on both sides to move away from a situation of distrust to one of shared values."

Cultivating healthy minds

Ongoing education is important, as is skills development. Training courses are conducted and include health and safety, firefighting and personal finance.

"The staff component on the farm is constantly reminded of the strict rules and regulations of the exacting European market," Gottlieb says.

"This eliminates a lot of potential problems that could have occurred."

• For more information contact Gottlieb Venter on 082 920 4841. |fw

Pux Molotswoane (35): agronomic manager

Pux Molotswoane is responsible for planting all the crops cultivated at Yukon Farms. He works with a team of 20 people to ensure adequate supplies of vegetables to the enterprise.

"I carry the huge responsibility with pride as I love the land," says a soft-spoken Pux.

"He is an integral part of the company," Gottlieb says. "He started at Yukon Farms in 2000 and his sense of responsibility was clear from the start. He also maintains important working relationships with the members of his team, which ultimately contributes to productivity."

"The company gave me the opportunity of professional success and, consequently, the ability to take care of my family in a dignified and proper way," Pux says.

Jacob Mofokeng (28): production manager

Jacob Mofokeng joined Yukon Farms in 2006 as a worker despite having some administrative experience from his previous job in town. He laughs about his bewilderment when he first started on the farm. "It took some time for me to fully grasp the extent of Yukon's operations and I was overwhelmed by the fast pace maintained on the farm," Jacob says.

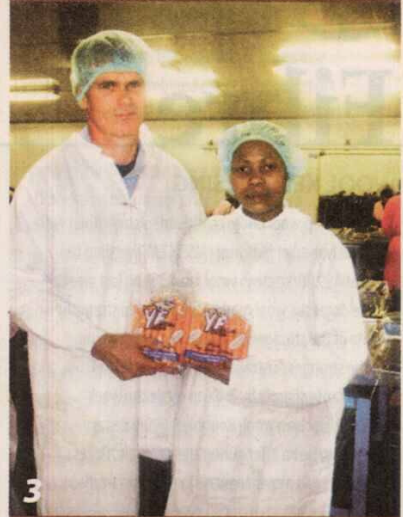
Gottlieb picked up on Jacob's persistence and dedication to his work soon after he joined. It was clear that the young man was management material. "Not only did he do more than was expected of him, he was also keen to know everything that was happening," Gottlieb says.

Climbing the ranks

Jacob was promoted through various levels of the company and is now the production manager. He is in charge of receiving the vegetables in the packhouse as well as quality and quantity control. He also ensures the products adhere to international standards and oversees a workforce of 230 people, responsible for packing the products.

One is immediately impressed by the industriousness and quietness in the room.

The key to his department's success is the fact that every employee knows what is expected of them. "Training is important as it contributes to confidence and higher productivity in the workplace," Jacob says. "Leadership, communication and control are automatically followed by commitment."



Ntaeleng Leanya (27): dispatch manager

"Watch out Gottlieb, I have set my aim at taking over as MD one of these days," says Ntaeleng Leanya. "I like challenges," she says, "and Yukon Farms has afforded me the opportunity of self improvement and professional success. What would my chances have been of a professional career in a small Free State town like Bothaville if it were not for Yukon Farms?"

A heavy responsibility for a great mind Ntaeleng is responsible for distributing up to 130t of vegetables in 22 different types of packaging to seven overseas clients per month. "It is both stimulating and stressful as one cannot afford to make any mistakes," she says. "The export market is exacting and requires only the best, and a simple mistake can lead to cancelled contracts."

"Ntaeleng started from scratch but was always prepared to work harder and she always lends a hand wherever she can," Gottlieb recalls. Her inquisitiveness also impressed management and it was clear that she had the potential to go far in the company.

Ntaeleng progressed through the ranks to obtain her current position and enthusiastically participated in training. "The skills development courses and management skills development were invaluable to my career development," she explains.

