

# Food for thought

## IN DEPTH

**M**ost businesses exist to make money, and most managing directors expect a substantial salary and an executive car for all their hard work as well as a share of the profits and the odd business lunch.

This is not the case at one Oxford company which was originally founded with the intention of giving less able adults the chance to shine and gain confidence in a working environment.

Oxford Wholefoods, based in a unit at Centermead on the Osney Mead industrial estate is a food packaging company and supplies businesses such as Oxfam and the Co-op with weighed, packed and sealed food products. It also supplies products to some of the country's top five-star hotel chains, as well as packing and distributing for specialist mail-order food firm Allergyfree.

The company was founded ten years ago, and



*Sarah Parker visits a business more interested in boosting staff confidence than making mountains of cash*

originally run by social services. Eight years ago, former sales rep Ms Gay Goodall took over as managing director.

She said: "Oxford Wholefoods was set up with the declared intention of employing adults with special needs. It is a small commercially-based company which started life with just three workers and two supervisors. We now have a team of 38 people and 30 are adults with learning difficulties.

"The aim was to encourage people with learning difficulties to adapt to real-work situations and give them the opportunity to develop the confidence and abilities needed to enable them to participate more fully in community life.

"This gives each person the chance to experience a real-work situation and hopefully progress to other employment or continue working at Oxford Wholefoods."

The company was provided with sheltered workshop accommodation by Oxfordshire Health Authority for its first four years, which gave the business a flying start. The

Oxfordshire Learning Disability Trust continues to support the company which now trades from rented premises.

Ms Goodall added that the company had to make a profit to cover overheads, such as rent and maintenance.

She said: "Our aim is to make a profit and our turnover is £240,000 a year. We make a small profit, but unfortunately not enough to be able to make major reinvestment in the company. I am hopeful that we will continue to grow and one day be able to do this. Myself and the other directors take very small salaries and there are no company cars or expense accounts here.

"Oxford Wholefoods is now far more commercially based than when I took over, but it had to change. We now have a good customer base and I have reached the stage where I have had to turn orders down because I don't have the equipment necessary to fulfil them."

The company uses a simple but effective production-line system of weighing, packing, labelling and sealing various food products including dried fruit and nuts and cereals, which is all done by hand.

Ms Goodall has just taken delivery of equipment that will make this process slightly more automated and would like to be in the position to invest £8,000 in a new machine to speed the process up even further.

She added: "This would not lead to a reduction in the workforce: it would simply mean that I could fulfil the bigger orders that are coming in and take on bigger contracts. It is a huge boost when top-class hotels come to you and ask you to work for them and this proves that although we are an unusual company we operate a very professional service."

Oxford Wholefoods buys products in bulk quantities, many from developing countries, and packs them into packets of various sizes.

Ms Goodall added: "It is while performing these tasks that the workforce learn skills relevant to the retail trade. The equipment we use is a mixture of old and new technology, but all very carefully chosen to suit the needs of our special workforce.

"We are in a very unusual situation and ultimately we are a business, but many of the people who work for us may not have chances of employment elsewhere and I hope that they benefit by working here. We do have to treat our staff with a





■ In balance . . . Ms Lynne Souch packs food at Oxford Wholefoods

Picture: Andy Cooper

little extra consideration and recognise their abilities and capabilities a little more than employers would normally. We are conscious of not destroying their confidence and get a lot of positive feedback from carers and families."

She added that she would encourage any employers to consider less able adults when recruiting. She said: "We have proved that you can run a professional and profitable business and employ people with difficulties without any real problems. I can understand employers being hesitant but our team here work very hard and are very happy.

"As directors we don't have the perks that other company directors have. Anything we make goes back into the business and now we make a profit I give pay rises every year. It is important that the staff get the lion's share at the moment, because it is important for them to know how valued they are.

"I hope that in the future Oxford Wholefoods will go from strength to strength — you cannot stand still in business or become complacent, it is vital that we push ourselves forward."