

## Case Study

# Blue Skies: Seamless Society Model laying the foundations for Gender Equity

Banana Link | November 2020



Photo: Blue Skies

## Overview

[Blue Skies](#) is a producer of fresh-cut fruits, 100% freshly squeezed juices, including coconut, grapes, mango, melon, papaya, pineapple, pomegranate and watermelon, and dairy free ice-creams. Founded in 1997 and operating from a HQ just outside Northampton in the UK, Blue Skies currently employs over 4,000 people in the UK, Ghana, Egypt, South Africa and Brazil.

Blue Skies supplies European retailers in the UK, France and the Netherlands, as well as selling its branded products in countries of origin such as Ghana, where it is one of the largest private sector employers, in terms of the number of people employed.

## Gender Equity- the Data

At Blue Skies, an annual 'Consolidated Balance Sheet' is compiled which tracks the company's progress towards ten priority commitments, ranging from economic performance, to protecting

biodiversity, to care for people. Within 'Care for People', gender disaggregated data is collected across the five countries in which the company operates. Reviewing the data reveals the following:

- 50% of the General Managers at Blue Skies are women (exceeding the global average of women in management positions which was 29% in 2019<sup>1</sup>)
- the overall workforce at Blue Skies is 60% female
- within the company there is a Gender Pay Gap average of only 3.3%. This is compared with an average gap of 17.3%, for example, in the UK<sup>2</sup>

While the proportion of women in employment decreases according to the seniority of the role, the data, as shown in the box below, shows that the progress towards gender equity has been made in terms of the number of women employees overall, and the proportion of women in upper and upper middle quartile roles, and the much lower than average gender pay gap.<sup>3</sup>

#	KPI	UNIT	GROUP	UK	GH	SA	EG	BR	GRI REF	SDG REF
3.01	Average Number of staff	#	4,312 (Total)	294	2,370	528	464	296	102-8	8.5
3.02	Staff Retention*	%	96.5% (Total)	99.1%	99.9%	99.8%	-	87.3%	401-1	-
3.03	Days lost due to industrial action	Days	0 (Total)	0	0	0	0	0	-	-
3.04	% average wage above national minimum wage	%	98% (Mean)	13.3%	312.6%	62.5%	36.6%	63.4%	202-1	-
3.05	Proportion of people receiving appraisals	%	87% (Total)	100%	100%	4%	100%	100%	404-3	-
3.06	Number of women in traditionally male jobs	#	38 (Total)	1	8	16	0	0	-	-
3.07	Number of men in traditionally female jobs	#	9 (Total)	0	4	0	3	0	-	-
3.08	Mean Gender Pay Gap	%	3.3% (Mean)	0.9%	2.41%	6.1%	-	7.1%	405-2	5.1, 10.1
	Median Gender Pay Gap	%	1.6% (Mean)	-3.1%	0.0%	0.0%	-	11.2%	-	-
3.09	Mean Bonus difference	%	27.4% (Mean)	N/A	N/A	27.4%	-	N/A	-	-
	Median Gender Pay Gap	%	26.6% (Mean)	N/A	N/A	26.6%	-	N/A	-	-
3.10	Proportion of male employees receiving a bonus	%	26% (Mean)	0%	0%	69%	98%	0%	-	-
3.11	Proportion of female employees receiving a bonus	%	34% (Mean)	0%	0%	31%	99%	0%	-	-
3.12	Males in lower quartile	%	46% (Mean)	54%	44%	31%	21%	24%	-	-
	Females in lower quartile	%	54% (Mean)	46%	56%	69%	79%	76%	-	-
3.13	Males in lower middle quartile	%	50% (Mean)	54%	40%	30%	92%	31%	-	-
	Females in lower middle quartile	%	50% (Mean)	46%	60%	70%	8%	69%	-	-
3.14	Males in upper middle quartile	%	56% (Mean)	46%	69%	27%	99%	40%	-	-
	Females in upper middle quartile	%	44% (Mean)	54%	31%	73%	1%	60%	-	-
3.15	Males in upper quartile	%	62% (Mean)	39%	62%	29%	96%	60%	-	-
	Females in upper quartile	%	38% (Mean)	61%	38%	71%	4%	40%	-	-

\* Based on 2019 six month data (January-June)

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.catalyst.org/research/women-in-the-workforce-global/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/genderpaygapintheuk/2019#the-gender-pay-gap>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.blueskies.com/jee2019.pdf>



Photo: Blue Skies

## Seamless Society

Almost 60% of Blue Skies employees are based in Ghana. On this site, fruit is taken from the farm, washed and sanitised, then cut and packaged ready for the customer, this is then flown in the belly of a passenger aircraft to the UK and other European countries. This is a just-in-time supply. Janet Lutterodt is General Manager at Ghana Fresh Cut Operation, which produces primarily mango, pineapple, papaya and coconut. When asked how Blue Skies has made such huge strides towards gender equity, the first thing Janet mentions is their “Seamless Society”.

Seamless Society is the name given to the culture of openness and familiarity that has been established at Blue Skies. Within the Seamless Society, Janet describes an open door policy, and says that “...irrespective of position, employees are encouraged to approach one another, call each other by their names, joke and laugh, and when the work is hard, we just get on with it.” Lack of hierarchy is another key feature: employees are not labelled ‘managers’ and ‘workers’- everyone is simply another colleague, another human. People are encouraged not to equate status to job position, or gender for that matter. Whether you are a man or woman, whatever your position in the business structure once employees arrive, “we are just one people” Janet explains. Founder and chairman Anthony Pile established these behaviours from his own personal business principles at the same time as he established the business. Anthony often visits Ghana where he mingles with people employed there, talks to them on a first name basis and holds “surgeries” as does a UK MP.

The Seamless Society model practised at Blue Skies, therefore, did not come about as an intervention designed to redress a pre-existing gender imbalance. Rather, it is a company wide practice that has been instrumental in creating a working culture where equity and inclusiveness is the norm. In Ghana, men dominate the political sphere, holding 87% of

parliamentary seats,<sup>4</sup> and women are underrepresented in technical, high-skilled, senior and higher earning employment levels<sup>5</sup>, so Blue Skies Ghana, a woman-managed operation with enviable gender equity accomplishments, goes against the grain. The inclusive culture does not limit itself to gender issues - at Blue Skies Ghana a team of deaf employees is also among the 2,000 strong workforce.

The impact of the Seamless Society ethos on the working culture is as notable in the UK as any other. Since beginning her role as Head of Technical at Blue Skies in 2018, Hella Lipper has found the unusual working culture in the Midlands factory striking: *“the mutual respect and sense of working together is something that I have never come across before”* she says of the Northamptonshire factory, where the majority of people originate from Eastern European countries like Poland, Romania, Lithuania and Latvia<sup>6</sup>. Like the Ghana operation, the Corby factory is also run by a woman manager.

## Joint Effort Enterprise

The Seamless Society working culture at Blue Skies is something that is mentioned again and again by employees when asked about the company’s gender equity achievements. To have firmly established this innovative working culture in a company which operates on an international level, and across different societies and cultures, is a notable achievement. The values to which Blue Skies adheres are clearly articulated under what they call their ‘Joint Effort Enterprise’. This is underpinned by the three core values of Diversity, Respect and Positive Return, defined as follows:

- ***We are strengthened by our Diversity:*** Diversity is the ‘Joint’ in the Joint Effort Enterprise and is one of the defining elements of our model. It reflects our commitment to breaking down the barriers that divide us and embracing the qualities that make us different.
- ***We are bound by our culture of Respect-*** Our culture is a key element of our JEE. Fundamentally, we believe that care for our people breeds care for our fruit, which in turn fosters a natural respect for the environment and the communities where we exist.
- ***We are driven by generating a Positive Return-*** Profit is all too often associated with corporate greed, but it shouldn’t be. Profit is essentially the positive net result of our actions, whether this is represented in financial terms or the impact we have on communities – it is all the same.<sup>7</sup>

The relationship between the people, the product and the environment is something that is consistently made visible within the company narrative. A poster from 2016 shows clearly how the three underlying principles - diversity (family), respect (culture) and positive return (profit) are interrelated and mutually supportive.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://theconversation.com/women-in-ghana-progress-but-important-challenges-remain-130065>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2017.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2017.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.fpcfreshtalkdaily.co.uk/single-post/2020/01/21/Inside-the-ethical-Corby-fruit-factory-helping-support-communities-across-Africa>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.blueskies.com/aboutus/>



# Our 2020 Blueprint Commitments



**TRAINING AND EDUCATION**

We are committed to ensuring all our people have the necessary training and education to fulfil their roles to their full potential



**DIVERSITY AND EQUALITY**

We are committed to ensuring our people are treated equally regardless of age, gender, race or background.



**WATER CONSERVATION**

We are committed to using as little water as possible and ensuring that as much of it as possible comes from a sustainable source.



**HEALTH AND WELLBEING**

We are committed to ensuring the safest and healthiest working environment for all our people.



**EMISSIONS**

We are committed to minimizing the emissions produced in the way we grow, manufacture and distribute our products.



**ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE**

We are committed to optimising the efficiency and profitability of our business, but never at the expense of our values.



**PACKAGING AND MATERIALS**

We are committed to minimising the environmental impact of all our materials, in terms of how they are sourced, used and disposed of.



**NON DISCRIMINATION**

We are committed to ensuring zero unjust or prejudicial treatment of people, especially on the grounds of race, age, or gender.



**EMPLOYMENT**

We are committed to providing the best place to work and operating a seamless society where everyone feels equally valued and respected.



**EFFLUENT AND WASTE**

We are committed to reducing waste and ensuring that as little of it as possible is either reused or recycled.



**ENERGY**

We are committed to using as little energy as possible and ensuring that as much of it as possible comes from a sustainable source.

9

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.blueskies.com/jee2019.pdf>

Within the Blueprint of commitments, the company states its commitment to training and education, which is another important aspect of the company working culture that supports gender equity. Developing leadership from within, supporting the skills development of staff and offering education and training opportunities helps many employees but is particularly important for women, who in countries like Ghana or Brazil, may not have had the same access to secondary education, and where female role models in positions of power and leadership are fewer in number. At Blue Skies, many of those in senior positions have worked their way up from entry level positions.

It is not just the model of leadership and progression that is carefully considered. The company also takes a thoughtful approach to ensuring that quality employment opportunities continue to be available for people who work in both the field and the factory in the countries of operation - ensuring that automation is introduced in a considered and balanced way, and bucking the trend by adding value at the source. By creating the finished product - cut fruit, ready for supermarket shelves, in the country of production - more work is available for local people, and more money invested in the local economy.

## Impact of gender equity

In terms of impact, Founder of Blue Skies, Anthony Pile, explains:

*“Blue Skies did not set out to achieve a 50-50 gender balance. We genuinely see the merit in everyone regardless of their circumstances. One of the pillars of our Joint Effort Enterprise business model is diversity and we have found that the more we grow and the more diverse we become in terms of the people we employ, the more successful we seem to be. So it's about drawing on the differences we find within our society that enables us to get more out of life and more out of our business. It makes us a little more friendly, tolerant, interesting and resourceful which enable us to think first about our society and second about the first person singular.*

*Women make excellent leaders and excellent foot soldiers. But so do the men. They are of course different and by having a healthy mixture of the two sexes we find we have a healthy society with bags of humour, care for the less fortunate amongst us as well as the defence of the business itself.*

*Both women and men bring their own perspectives, just as older staff do, the less physically able do and as the members of the various religions of course do in Blue Skies. We celebrate these differences, but frankly they make us what we are and keep us safe from complacency, sloth, inertia and even fraud.”*