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**PRESS RELEASE  
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***Why fresh food companies are taking on career-changer apprentices***

AM Fresh is one of a number of companies who have taken on apprentices who have swapped their established career paths to join the fresh produce industry. With the launch of MDS’ Leadership and Management scheme last year, which offers apprenticeships in the food supply chain to those who have worked in different sectors, company bosses say they have seen the benefits of offering roles to mature apprentices with experience.

Lloyd Thompson, Head of Technical at fresh food innovator AM Fresh, is managing MDS apprentice, former elite swim coach, Mark McKenna, who is in his 30s.

“We have undoubtedly seen the merits of taking on apprentices who have come from different career paths and have some life experience under their belt,” says Lloyd. “Mark has brought well-honed skills with him from his days coaching championship swimmers which transfer well into what we are doing every day. He is a clear communicator, a great listener and an excellent team player. He may not have known much about the industry or citrus fruit, but his appetite to achieve, perhaps accelerated by making this conscious move at this time in life, has quickly propelled him into the role and I know I can rely on him to deliver on really important parts of the process. He brings a maturity and confidence that have been a real asset not only within the team, but contributing around the table with big retail customers, which holds huge responsibility.”

Mark had been coaching international championship swimmers for 11 years when, newly married and a baby on the way, he decided to join the inaugural MDS Leadership and Apprenticeship Programme and start afresh with a career in food and fresh produce. Called brave by friends, it involved a pay cut at an expensive time in life, but he believes it’s a worthwhile steppingstone to new opportunities and an attractive £35,000+ salary post-apprenticeship:

“I was attracted by the chance to work in four different companies over the two years with MDS’ new programme, exposing me to various aspects and roles, rather than applying for a job in a new sector that I didn’t know if I would like or not. There was a bit of a safety blanket, knowing I’d be mentored and wasn’t expected to know everything from the beginning, but it was also an opportunity I’d struggle to get elsewhere to expand my network and meet different potential employers, to learn across disciplines and get a feel for what I could be good at.

“It’s an industry that I hadn’t considered but which is crying out for driven and determined people,” he adds. “The leadership training that MDS offers to support the apprenticeship has stretched and challenged me, and as a diverse group of ages and experience, we are learning all the time from each other.”

Mark, who is currently a Technical Assistant with the eight-strong citrus team at AM Fresh, says there are a number of myths surrounding apprenticeships which he wants to dispel:

“People often think of apprenticeships being for young people, maybe for the trades or with being poorly paid, but none of it’s true. At MDS the starting salary is £24,000, and this is supported by really excellent leadership and management training to push you to new limits and salary brackets. It’s an industry I wasn’t familiar with, but like swim training it’s fast paced and different every day which I love, and the apprenticeship is opening new doors and long-term prospects I didn’t know existed. The benefit of taking on this apprenticeship has far outweighed any risk. The opportunities are difficult to put a price on.”

MDS has run a well-known graduate training programme for over 35 years, developing a valuable pipeline of talent for the fresh produce and food industry. In February 2022, they launched the Leadership and Management Apprenticeship for those at any stage in the careers, whether graduates or non-graduates and an Operations and Supply Chain apprenticeship. Between the three programmes, MDS filled a record number of placements in over 60 food and fresh produce companies.

The companies that took on career changer apprentices include Fenmarc, Finsbury Food Group, Produce World and Morrisons. MDS Business Development Manager, Kirsty Barden, said:

“We’ve had excellent feedback from our member businesses who have taken on mid-career apprentices. It’s a big decision to take up an apprenticeship at a later stage in life, in a new line of work, and this no doubt brings with it drive and appetite to excel. The overriding message from member businesses is that their expectations have been greatly exceeded and that they value being able to access this wide pool of talent from different backgrounds and age groups that they can bring into the business long-term.”

MDS is a not-for-profit built on a mission to produce a pipeline of well-trained, capable leaders for the food supply chain. It fully supports businesses with the recruitment of appropriate candidates for roles, selecting the three most suitable from all the applicants for final interview; provides market-leading leadership and management training for trainees; and support and mentoring for line managers. More than 95% of MDS trainees stay within the food industry and almost exclusively within member businesses.

**Editors’ notes**

**About MDS**

[**www.mds-ltd.co.uk**](http://www.mds-ltd.co.uk)

MDS is the UK’s foremost provider of management training for the food industry. Founded in 1986 as a not-for-profit membership organisation, it creates a pipeline of well trained, capable leaders to work in all aspects of the food supply chain..

Member businesses include some of the industry’s most forward-thinking companies including Aldi, Barfoots, Berry Gardens, Protolan and Syngenta. They provide secondments for MDS trainees to learn ‘on the job’ in roles with real responsibility, often managing specific projects or filling seasonal peaks.

Trainees are carefully recruited by MDS and as a result include high calibre individuals with the drive and ambition to achieve and be a real asset to food supply chain businesses, even for the short term of their secondment. All secondments are supported by off-the-job mentoring and training from MDS in partnership with The Apprenticeship College.

With [three different training programmes](https://www.mds-ltd.co.uk/careers/), MDS attracts a diverse range of candidates, from graduate trainees, those early in their careers, either graduates or non-graduates, to more experienced people looking for a career change or returning to work after a break. The food supply chain offers a wide variety of opportunities and MDS equips people to make the most of them.