

MONTAGE

CASE STUDY – Making recruitment and payroll easy picking



With a top-quality crop of cherries growing on its trees, New Zealand Cherry Corporation needs to be super-prepared for the short six-week picking and packing season that starts each December, using hundreds of largely itinerant workers.

But with manual recruitment and payroll support systems, the season's start was bound to be slow and laborious. Cherry Corporation needed solutions, and fast.

In 2014, they found Montage Online. Result: Linking with Cherry Corporation's payroll provider EzyPay, Montage installed online recruitment, timesheets and payroll support systems in just over two months. Happy client, happy workers, success all round.

Scenario

New Zealand Cherry Corporation prides itself on the quality of the fruit from its orchard just outside Cromwell.

It's no small operation, spread over 40 hectares and two sites, including the largest, fully-covered orchard in New Zealand's scenic jewel of Central Otago. Some 450 tonnes of the highly-desired fruit are produced and packed each season, 85 percent of it destined for export.

Until last season, there was just one problem. Choosing about 320 employees to pick and pack for the six-week season starting mid-December was a nightmare.

Human Resources Advisor Kirsty Allison would be deluged with hundreds and sometimes thousands of applicants, people like backpackers for whom the chance to earn some short-term money was ideal.



Applicants could apply via Facebook and the company's website by filling out an application form or visiting the office directly. It took weeks to process the manual, hand-written documents one by one, determining the necessary criteria and experience for the job.

"I had a big board room table that I used with a yes pile, no pile and a maybe pile," said Kirsty.

Then, once pickers and packers were selected and advised - another huge task for Kirsty - the paperwork tripled when employees had to provide or fill in other documentation - work visas, passports, IRD forms and copies of employment contracts.

After induction and training, the actual picking work could begin, starting with about 50 pickers in December and ramping up for the main export in the first week of January with about 200 pickers. It may have been a gradual process at first but that was just as well because processing manually took weeks anyway.

It was, as those most closely involved knew, no way to start the season. The company needed a better recruitment system, and more.

It also needed a better solution with payroll, something to replace the laborious hand-written process requiring Kirsty to type all details manually, a system with too much potential for error. Between them, recruitment and payroll could take 100 hours a week.



The Solution

Paul Croft, Managing Director of Infinity Group in Wanaka, and his team provided Cherry Corporation's payroll and accounting services. Infinity is also a major shareholder in Cherry Corporation. They too knew the corporation's operations needed streamlining. The recently appointed International Sales Manager Sharon Kirk and Packhouse Manager Ross Kirk introduced payroll bureau Ezypay with which they had a long association.

In turn, Ezypay had a trusted association with Montage and the Montage Online solution and initial discussions began with Montage's Simon Lind and Tommy Sharp to streamline Cherry Corporation's operations.

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The discussions quickly became urgent with the approaching picking season not far away. Twelve days after discussions began, a delivery agreement was signed.

Reece van der Velden, responsible for Domestic Sales and IT Systems, recalled: "When we were brain-storming the entire, logical process from start to finish, I remember Simon loved using the whiteboard. He was quick to grasp our requirements and he did so by his methodology, logically walking through the business process. He ensured nothing was missed and that the end result would be a system that's as efficient as possible."



While Montage only had a couple of months to set up a new system, they knew they would streamline the whole process with an online-based solution, moving from paper to electronic.

Applicants could go to Cherry Corporations website where they could complete and submit their applications online. The system used a point based criteria to score each applicant providing the HR team a starting point for short-listing the applicants. This was extremely handy considering they received over 2000 applications.

The Montage team worked overtime. There was no time for a test run. Some teething issues were overcome but it worked immediately. As soon as the Montage people had completed the necessary work, the HR advisors started recruitment.

Said Kirsty: "It was put together in a ridiculously short amount of time. How they did it, I don't know."

The Results

Hundreds of work applications started rolling in via the online portal from November 4 and the first payroll ran from December 15.

Support from Montage throughout the implementation never wavered.

Kirsty described the Montage team as "amazing". Phone calls were made "seven days a week, pretty well all hours. They always answered the phone, always there to help me. It was great."

She still reviewed the hundreds of applications individually but being online, information had all been captured and she could review and deal with them far more quickly. Selections were also easier to make and follow-up documentation could be sent immediately to successful applicants. In turn, applicants could upload visas, IRD forms and passports.

The only paperwork was the actual contract because the company had to ensure employees had read them carefully and signed to that effect.

"It was a much easier season," she said. Payroll was also "one hundred times better."

Sharon described the Montage project team as "very professional and easy to work with. They are happy to listen to our requirements and try to incorporate everything we need into the programme. No problem was too small or too big, they worked hard to make this a success for us."

There were also about 80 staff in the company's new packhouse. They also had to fill in time sheets - time in, time out - potentially another laborious paper-based system with start and end times.

Supervisors had to write a unique start and end time for each picker on paper, down to the minute.

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Under the new system, it was done online through the supervisor filling in forms electronically and sending them to the office where hours are calculated.

Each employee had his or her own secure portal and could log into the system to check their remuneration instead of coming into the office and asking for a printout.

Concurrent usage was the key, Reece said, allowing multiple user access to the same system.

"Before we had only one HR person and, if you have 200 people go to that single person, it doesn't work. You'd have queues of people waiting to see the one person.

What do employees think of the new system?

"The people themselves think it's great. They like it."

The Future

"Montage has given us the building blocks we need to develop further into the future as well," he said. "We can build on what we have now or streamline other processes in the business as well. We're going to a customer relationship management system for managing our exports and then we'll be looking at health and safety and compliance and tidying that up as well."

NZ Cherry Corporation works on a performance-based system of how many buckets employees pick per hour, or how many per day. It also provides the necessary training to improve themselves, for example, by training a picker to safely pick with two hands and thus double their performance.

"We want to keep our employees motivated," Reece said. "We make it as fair to the picker as possible. Other players would average over the entire week, which they are allowed to do, but we average over the day because that's fairer to the picker. We can crunch that down to number of buckets per hour as well. It means we pay for exactly what they pick."

In the 2015 season, the Montage system will increase visibility of picker performance. This will enable Cherry Corporation to monitor picker performance, and then provide additional training to the pickers to help improve their picking, resulting in a higher take home pay for the picker.

And the financial improvement?

"It will have paid for itself by next year," Reece said.

