

Playdale Playgrounds Developing a digital workforce.

“*Made Smarter has been at our side during an extremely challenging time and given the confidence to keep pushing forward.*”

Paul Mallinson,
Technical and
Operations Director



Donna Edwards from Made Smarter with Oliver Harbridge Playdale Playgrounds

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A playground equipment manufacturer has upskilled senior leadership to drive its growth ambitions, following support from Made Smarter.

Playdale Playgrounds worked with the programme's Organisational Workforce Development (OWD) team as part of a holistic package which included grants towards technology projects and a Digital Transformation Workshop (DTW).

The company, based in Cumbria, was paired with a digital intern to lead a successful project to introduce 3D scanning to its design process. He has since taken up a full-time role as a design engineer with Playdale.

Meanwhile, Playdale's head of digital development was the first to complete Made Smarter's fast-track Leading Digital Transformation programme and is now empowered to drive their digitalisation strategy.

Paul Mallinson, Technical and Operations Director at Playdale, said: *"Our approach to digital transformation is to balance new technology with new skills. That has been the real value of Made Smarter. The wrap-around offer has crystallised our digital strategy, accelerated our technology adoption and brought in essential new digital skills to make the most of that technology."*

The Challenge

Playdale designs and makes apparatus for councils, schools, and leisure attractions, exporting to 49 different countries.

Over the past 45 years, Playdale has grown to achieve a £14m turnover with 100 staff working across two factories and a distribution warehouse.

The company first engaged with Made Smarter in 2019 to support its digital transformation ambitions.

A digital workshop identified how technology could overcome challenges such as introducing automation to reduce waste and increase productivity, data capture from legacy machines to improve uptime, and incorporating 3D scanning to accelerate design and improve the customer experience. The process also revealed a vital need to upskill its existing workforce and bring in new skills.

Paul explained: *"We operate in a very competitive sector, so we are driven to make our products quicker, smarter, and retain the quality we're known for."*

"The crux of the challenge was that while we have a crystal-clear awareness of what we need to do, we have struggled with the resources and skills to drive it forward. As a manufacturer we need a more digitally-capable workforce to keep progressing our digital strategy."

The Solution

Having secured grant funding to invest in a 3D laser scanning project, Playdale needed someone to lead it.

Greg Saul, a graduate in product design and technology, was identified as a match through the digital internship programme. Over three months he worked with sales and design teams to embed a new process which captures 3D survey data of a customer's site. VR and AR technologies are then used to evaluate new designs and demonstrate them to customers.

Playdale has also been able to upskill its head of digital development, Oliver Harbridge, who manages all digital projects.

This includes those backed by Made Smarter, including the integration of a new state-of-the-art Smart CNC routing machine, and a pilot project to deploy sensors to a traditional drill to capture real-time performance and predictive maintenance data.

Oliver completed Made Smarter's fast track Leading Digital Transformation programme which uses a blend of face-to-face workshops, online webinars, case studies and site visits to smart factories to see technology in action.

The Benefits

New technology has brought Playdale some major gains.

The introduction of a CNC machine fully integrated with design software, replacing a previously long-winded manual process of programming a machine to organise and cut products, increased productivity by 20%, reduced waste by 10%, and increased flexibility to take on more customised orders.

Overall, this has supported Playdale to grow its exports by 50% to £2.5M over the last three years.

3D scanning has transformed design. By digitising a previously labour-intensive capture of site data, design time has reduced by 20% and improved customer experience.

Meanwhile, the project focusing on capturing data from legacy machinery is ongoing but has given Playdale some valuable insights into how it uses its equipment and the process of data capture and visualisation. But the real gain for Playdale is a



cultural change embracing digital transformation.

Paul explained: *"When we started our digital transformation our concern was that without a digitally capable workforce our progress would be slow."*

"Embedding digital natives like Greg and Oliver into the business has been a huge outcome from our partnership with Made Smarter. And in Oliver we now have an emerging leader who is engaging with the workforce to flush out digitalisation opportunities."

The Future

Playdale is now looking to roll out a 3D scanning toolkit for its global distributors, to further increase export sales. Other areas being explored include further investment in additive

manufacturing and a laser pipe cutter.

But the dream remains a smart factory.

Paul added: *"Digital transformation never stops. We are on a journey to create a digital workflow from initial enquiries through to design, production, delivery, and installation."*

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