

MADE SMARTER

Bridging the gap to future growth

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From the left, Emily Rowles (Bridge Cheese), Barry Jones (Made Smarter), Denis Pelych (WMG), Michael Harte (Bridge Cheese) and Annie Keogh (Bridge Cheese)

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A Telford firm which sells enough cheese to top 1,500 pizzas every week is on course for continued significant growth after winning two prestigious awards connected with the Made Smarter West Midlands programme.

Bridge Cheese, which supplies cheese and dairy products to the food manufacturing, wholesale and food service sectors, was set-up in 2018 by Managing Director Michael Harte and Operations Director Martin Bowden.

From a team of five, the business has grown to employing 80 members of staff and has extended its premises at Stafford Park 13 to 25,000 sq ft.

The company joined the Made Smarter West Midlands initiative to improve its technology systems, and the success of a new Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system led to Bridge Cheese winning the Made Smarter award for the Marches and the overall award for the region, at the inaugural Made Smarter Adoption, West Midlands, awards ceremony in Birmingham in May. They have now progressed to the national Made Smarter Adoption Awards, where the winners will be announced in Liverpool on June 27.

Michael said: "It is great recognition for the business and everybody involved in the business. Our staff are extremely proud that we have won these two awards and it has validated the journey we have been on through this digital transformation programme.

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The Challenge

Bridge Cheese initially used Excel documents when there were only five employees before transferring to Sage for the financial aspects of running the business.

Michael explained: "Through a lack of attention, focus and time, we went down a rabbit hole of various systems which promised much but we found ourselves in a position where they weren't able to provide us with the information we needed and we were compromising the future growth of the business.

"We needed to get out of the rabbit hole so I made contact with Liz Wakeham-Jones at Telford & Wrekin Council's business support team and she asked if we'd heard of Made Smarter because she thought it would be a good fit.

"We had an initial chat with Barry Jones from Made Smarter West Midlands about our situation at that time, what we wanted to achieve, and the challenges we had, and that led to us joining the programme."

Barry Jones, Digital Transformation Specialist for Made Smarter West Midlands, who works with businesses in the Marches area, said: "Michael and Martin knew they needed to update their technology to meet the growing needs of their business but, like many SMEs, they didn't have the resources to appoint someone to carry out the research and make a value judgement.

"That is where Made Smarter's support is vital -the digital roadmap

we produce gives valuable advice and the business then has the confidence that they are investing in digital technology that will transform their business in the short and long-term."

The Solution

Barry arranged for Michael and Martin to meet with Denis Pelych from WMG, at the University of Warwick, one of Made Smarter's strategic partners.

He carried out a two-day exercise to discuss Bridge Cheese's requirements with managers from every department to create a digital roadmap.

This led to the business applying for a £20,000 grant towards buying DEM Systems with Bridge Cheese investing £80,000 in the food manufacturing software system.

Michael said: "Denis took us under his wing and asked searching questions to ensure we came up with a functional system that we needed.

"We didn't have the knowledge, skills or know-how, and the knowledge of Denis and Barry meant that when we were talking to vendors we were asking the right questions.

"The grant money was almost a secondary benefit. What was more important was the digital roadmap because it is still relevant today."

Denis Pelych, of WMG, said: "Bridge Cheese has expanded from a business having 30 customers to over 60 throughout the UK and with the new system and better stock control, it has freed up £1.5 million in cash flow from its working capital.

"We have helped the business to be set-up more flexibly because it is important not to over-buy, as well as improve dispatch and delivery performance, and that's where the Made Smarter programme has really helped. It has allowed Michael and Martin to have time to focus on the growth of the business."

The Benefits

The new digital technology is now being used in the warehouse, production and planning departments.

Before becoming involved in the Made Smarter programme, Bridge Cheese was manufacturing 162,000 kg of cheese per week and it has now increased to a current rate of 217,000 kg of cheese per week.

Michael said: "Automating the business processes has taken the anxiety out of the business because it has improved our stock control and has freed up the time of our staff to look at planning so we are less reactive and more predictable.

"Bringing in that element of control through our data is important because the system gives us visibility so we can start to make decisions which tie-in with developing the business and we have the confidence that we can deliver what our customers need."

Bridge Cheese has also has put together a staff development plan so that there's a system in place for everyone to have access to the data and to give people the opportunity to learn and gain new skills.

Michael added: "We are implementing the next phase

by investing in our staff. Jarek Czaplinski has been promoted to project manager and is taking part in digital leadership training. "One of our first employees, Michelle Pitchford, who joined as an administrator, is taking her AAT accountancy exams, and financial controller Lesley Corbett is recruiting a finance apprentice so that she can focus on our medium and long-term challenges as well as our Environmental Social Responsibility.

"We have also strengthened our sales team through Annie Keogh and marketing apprentice Lillie Bell, so we are continuing to add to our talented colleagues."

The Future

Bridge Cheese has targeted goals for the next three to five years thanks to the Made Smarter digital roadmap.

Michael said: "We want to develop our exports market. We are confident in the infrastructure of our business that we can continue to grow and we have brought in extra sales resources to achieve that.

"We are looking at launching some brands and investing in Research and Design - we have invested £60,000 on new plant to support our sales growth.

"Our plan is to maintain ten per cent growth year-on-year and not only to be really successful commercially, but successful for everybody in the company."

CASE STUDY