

Fresh team on the ball

A sense of common purpose and deep passion for their work drives a group of young graduates through an uncharted terrain in innovative agriculture.

Botswana's economy continues to experience moderate growth, but with record numbers of graduates entering the job market each year, traditional modes of employment in the mining and government sectors are no longer coping. The buzzword on everybody's lips is economic diversification. One adventurous entrepreneurial team is leading the way: Go Fresh!, a high-tech fresh produce company, run by a group of Botswana's youth.

In terms of new-graduate employment, Botswana could be seen as a victim of its own success. As more and more Batswana complete their tertiary education with a university degree – this year alone there were 3500 graduates from the University of Botswana (UB) and the Botswana College of Agriculture (BCA) – the post-college job hunting market is increasingly competitive.

One company determined to help buck this trend is Go Fresh! (incorporating Fodder Solutions and Langdon Organic), who from its inception in 2013, has employed new-graduate BCA students to set up, run, and grow its innovative agricultural brand.

Founded by American entrepreneur and former Accenture global executive, Michelle Adelman, Go Fresh! is seeking to train, empower and motivate its youth leaders to new heights.

As Kokesto 'KK' Gatsoswe, 28, the company's Gaborone Operations Supervisor explains, "I've enjoyed it since Day 1. It's my first time to see hydroponic and controlled environment technology in action and it's a very good solution, perfectly suited to Botswana's problems of land allocation and lack of water."

'KK' and his teammates are spearheading a horticultural and agricultural solutions business that offers increased yields, whilst using less land and less water. Botswana is the size of France, or Texas, but much of it is classified semi-arid desert. Rainfall is minimal and irrigation is often the farmer's biggest concern.

Go Fresh! uses best-in-class technology

that with the use of computers automatically controls the climate of its fodder systems and greenhouses, as well as the fertilization of the water being used to grow the crops (lettuces, tomatoes, herbs, cucumbers, peppers, chilli peppers).

Onalerona 'Oxy' Makopo, also 28, Sales and Customer Relations Supervisor, talks about how he thinks Go Fresh! has got it right, and why the team is so successful. Although such a challenging, primarily 'sales' role is a new environment for him as a scientist, Michelle liked his natural confidence and saw that he was a people's person.

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"The team works because we are age-mates with the same core values, and friends from our BCA days. It's also very important that because we are young we're all tech-friendly and excited by the new technology, rather than afraid of it," says 'Oxy'. He has thrived under the conditions and likes the way the team are allowed to solve problems on their own, given a lot of autonomy, right from the beginning. Michelle's faith in them is repaid by a desire to make the company do well. "I'm like a diamond. I need to be put under a lot of pressure and heat before my beauty is revealed!" he smiles.

Go Fresh! has two farms, one in Gaborone, and another in Maun in the north of Botswana, each with greenhouses measuring over 4000 square meters and growing fresh animal feed (fodder) with one metric ton/day capacity. The goal is to change the mind-set of farmers not familiar with hydroponically grown fodder sprouts (a process that turns 1kg of barley



PICTURED (left to right): Onalerona "Oxy" Makopo, Kokesto "KK" Gatsoswe, Faith Mojanga, Josephinah "Josy" Galegane, Katlego Selemogwe

seeds into 8kg of edible grass shoots in just six days) and convince hotels, lodges, supermarkets, that they no longer have to turn to imports in order to get top quality, sustainably grown fresh produce.

The two years of operations have not been without challenges, but it seems that Go Fresh!'s faith in their new-graduate team is a model that other employers might follow in future. Certainly the team members themselves seem very much aware that they are in a unique position and should serve as role models to other young Batswana.

Josephina 'Josy' Galegane, 25, Finance and Administration Supervisor has been with Go Fresh! since the beginning and says she relishes the challenges and opportunities on offer. "Michelle has a very clear vision and she tells us what she wants, but not necessarily how to get it, hence the exciting element, we as a team have to work it out ourselves. I, personally, have grown beyond my own expectations; not only learning about the technology of the greenhouses and hydroponics (which I studied in college but had never seen in action), but also everything else in-between from pricing, procurement, and petty cash to VAT returns and payroll."

The key word here is exposure. Already a role model in her own community, with young girls at church approaching her for advice, Michelle has inspired Josy to want to become a successful entrepreneur in her own right in the future.

Faith Mojanaga, 26, Head Grower in Gaborone, sums it up: "The key to our success here at Go Fresh! is the fact that not only have we been given the autonomy to make our own mistakes and correct them (as individuals and as a team), but we are held accountable for them."

In the Go Fresh! model what we do on a daily basis has a direct impact on yield, productivity, and profitability. What we do as individuals makes or breaks how the team, and the company, performs. Nobody wants to let the others down."