

Hi-ho, hi-ho, it's off to *organic* work we go...

» By Jan Nary

Organic industry employment is forecast to strengthen from 6.2% in 2012-13 to a phenomenal 11.2% in 2013-14, according to recent findings from international researcher IBISWorld.

Job opportunities are expected to relate to increased production, creating demand for farmers, farm-hands, skilled and unskilled labourers, and itinerant workers such as pickers, but also offering opportunities for ecologists, biodynamic farming specialists and researchers.

It seems that as a future career one could do worse than consider organics. At least ten courses are available in sustainable/ organic/ biodynamic farming (mainly at TAFE Institutes) and organic produce is experiencing unprecedented uptake in the marketplace. If there is an imminent boom in organics, will development of Australia's employee skill base – and supply chains – be equal to it?

Ross Cowling is a partner in **United Organics**, a Brisbane-based organic wholesaling company that buys from farms Australia-wide.

"Most of the farmers supplying us did their learning on the job – some converted from conventional farming; some grew up with organics. Either way they did the hard yards and established something to pass on to their kids. It's interesting that most children brought up on organic farms seem to stay there – they can see a good future with good premiums for a well-run business," he says.

United Organics has 300 suppliers on its books, 60 to 80 of whom would be supplying at any given time, but Ross says that he would welcome more organic farmers into the mix.

"We need more suppliers and more farmers to be educated in organics," he says. "More TAFE courses would help and there's a need for trained consultants in areas like soil agronomy and inputs. It would be good to see the government facilitate that with the CSIRO and the Department of Agriculture."

On-the-job learning is the way that Ross came into organic wholesaling fifteen years ago, but he says that the comparatively small market share of organic wholesaling – and retailing – doesn't warrant the establishment of external training courses.

Those sentiments are echoed by Anni Brownjohn of the **Right Food Group**.



"Organics is still a sunrise industry; organic grocery sales may have a bigger footprint because they cross into 'health' sectors of the market. Our products attract consumers who want good food, along with those with food allergies."

Anni acknowledges that there is a shortage of skilled organic/ food safety practitioners, but questions the industry's current ability to support dedicated organic specialists in this complex area.

"We've had to become skilled in various food safety programs including HACCP, as well as organic standards and major retailers' vendor quality assurance systems. The most effective way to run these programs was to integrate them into a single quality assurance/food safety program. As there was no training in organic QA system integration available, we developed our documented program in house – very much on-the-job education! As a result, we have a stringent organic/QA/Food Safety system that major retailers love and we now provide these integrated documented systems to the industry across Australia and South-east Asia."

When it comes to her own staff, Anni's company, the Right Food Group, undertakes in-house training in organic food /

developing/ processing and market supply.

"It's demanding for staff who have a background in conventional food processing to get their head around the requirements for organics. We find the key to developing good organic staff is not their academic qualifications, but their commitment to producing pure, great tasting food. We've had chefs and food technologists on board who want to work in a 'clean industry'.

"I feel that it's still too early to institute large-scale academic based organic training programs for food industry professionals. We could have a beneficial influence at an academic level – and improve the nation's health – by providing input into existing food technology and food safety courses."

One area of education that is up and running is organic farming. Rob Fenton is the head teacher at Riverina TAFE's Natural Environment Centre (NEC), which offers a Diploma in Organic Farming.

"Organic farmers are passionate about their farms being in the hands of workers who understand and respect organic principles. Talking to farmers at BFA Roadshow events I get a strong feeling that demand for organic-trained farm workers is outstripping supply," Rob says. "Demand for organic training at the NEC has increased

recently and more skilled teachers, drawn from organic backgrounds, are being taken on to share the load."

Rob says that TAFE is currently negotiating with a national apprenticeship centre to establish a national organic farming traineeship, aiming to connect trained organic graduates and potential employers.

Alasdair Smithson, Principal Consultant with **Organic Knowledge**, expects the consumer-driven organic market to grow faster than any other sector of the global food and drink market.

"The Organic Market is a very diverse market with future national and international employment opportunities in marketing, auditing, processing, exporting, importing, wholesaling, farming, eco-tourism, organic certification and policy development," Alasdair says.

Alasdair feels that production-based agricultural courses could be supplemented by more general training in such subjects such as business, marketing, food safety and environmental science, citing the findings of

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Organic cosmetics are being warmly welcomed by consumers and the recent launch of the organic cosmetic Bud logo will do much to dispel consumer confusion about the validity of organic claims.

Independent consultant Owen Gwilliam established *Organic Advice* only a year ago and has found that most of his work has focussed on the growing organic cosmetics industry.

"There is not a lot of agreement

worldwide on organic cosmetic standards, which makes the process very complex," Owen says.

"The Australian standard is one of the strictest- and best – but manufacturing companies that seek certification are faced with having qualified chemists with no training in organics. With the boom that seems imminent in the industry there could be an increased demand for independent consultants – there are only a handful in Australia at present – to write organic management plans, develop forms and systems and provide guidance necessary for certification."

Meanwhile, industry growth watchers will keep an eye on a sector that is certainly on the move. ◀▶

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