

## Refreshing the formula for growth



Natural Fruits & Drinks taps SMU student-consultants to strengthen HR processes and build a structured people framework for its next phase of expansion.

For more than 30 years, Natural Fruits & Drinks (NFD) has quietly built its place in Singapore's beverage industry, supplying concentrated juices, cordials and premixes to businesses across the island. But as the company looked ahead to its next phase of growth, one question became

hard to ignore: How do you scale a business without losing clarity in how people work, hire and grow together?

As the company enters a phase of organisational renewal and expansion, strengthening its internal people practices has become a key priority. To support this effort, NFD turned to a fresh perspective by engaging student-consultants from the UOB-SMU Asian Enterprise Institute (UOB-SMU AEI) SME Consulting Programme (SCP). Guided by a Project Advisor and Project Manager from the Institute, the team worked closely with the company over a 16-week engagement to review existing HR practices and develop practical tools that could support future hiring and workforce development. Over this period, the team stepped inside the business, speaking with management, mapping workflows, and tracing how hiring and employee practices evolved over time.

From initial conversations and research, three priorities quickly emerged. First, the need for a clear employee handbook that brings policies, expectations and practices into one accessible guide.

Second, a more structured approach to hiring. As the company grows, recruitment can no longer rely on informal processes. It needs consistency, fairness and clarity, aligned with Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) principles.

Third, a way to listen. An employee satisfaction survey was designed to give NFD a simple but effective way to understand how its people experience the workplace.

The deliverables were practical in nature, and their development was grounded in carefully designed survey methodologies. Through a combination of secondary data collection methods, internal consultations and primary survey methods, the student-consultants gained a deeper understanding of the company's operating environment and workforce needs.

## **Gathering the ingredients**

As with many SCP engagements, the project began with a discovery phase. The student-consultants first conducted secondary data collection, reviewing employment regulations, industry guidelines and widely adopted HR frameworks relevant to SMEs in Singapore. This included examining policies aligned with Ministry of Manpower (MOM) legislation and TAFEP guidelines, ensuring that any frameworks developed would be consistent with recognised workplace standards.

This stage provided valuable insight into how HR systems typically evolve as companies scale. In many SMEs, people-related processes tend to develop organically alongside the business. However, as organisations expand, clearer documentation and more structured frameworks become essential for maintaining consistency across teams.

By analysing reference materials and reviewing existing documentation, the team identified areas where NFD's HR practices could be strengthened or formalised. These insights laid the foundation for the next phase of the project.

## **Refining the framework**

With this groundwork in place, the student-consultants moved into primary survey methods to understand the company's internal practices more closely.

Structured discussions were conducted with the company's HR representatives and management team. These conversations focused on mapping existing workflows, from hiring procedures and employee documentation to internal communication practices.

For many growing companies, recruitment processes can evolve informally over time as the organisation adapts to operational demands. By documenting these workflows and comparing them against recognised employment guidelines, the team was able to identify opportunities to introduce greater structure while preserving the flexibility that SMEs often value.

Another key component of this phase was the development of an employee satisfaction survey. The survey was designed as a practical tool to help NFD gather employee feedback on workplace experience, engagement and organisational culture.

Producing the survey required careful attention to question design and clarity to ensure it could yield meaningful insights while remaining simple and accessible for employees to complete.

These primary survey activities enable the team to build a well-rounded understanding of NFD's workplace dynamics, ensuring that any proposed frameworks would be firmly grounded in the company's operational realities.

### **Mixing the right formula**

With insights gathered from both secondary data collection methods and internal consultations, the student-consultants began translating their findings into a set of practical deliverables: a comprehensive employee handbook, a recruitment process and guidelines framework aligned with TAFEP principles and an employee satisfaction survey. Each piece was designed to be usable and not just well-written, but something the company could apply immediately. Together, these deliverables provide a cohesive and scalable foundation for NFD's evolving HR practices.

### **Serving the next stage of growth**

Beyond the documentation produced, the project also surfaced broader questions.

"What defines NFD as a company? What values guide how we hire, manage and grows our people? And what makes us an employer worth choosing?," Cindy Chan, NFD's Director, shared.

One observation was the importance of defining core company values. Without well-articulated values, it can be difficult for potential employees and external partners to understand the organisation's culture and identity. Establishing a set of guiding principles could therefore help anchor HR functions such as recruitment, employee engagement and performance management.

Another area identified was the need to strengthen the company's Employee Value Proposition (EVP). By clearly communicating what differentiates NFD as an employer, the organisation can enhance its ability to attract high-quality talent while improving employee retention.

These insights demonstrate how structured survey methodologies can uncover opportunities that extend beyond immediate operational improvements, offering strategic perspectives that support longer-term organisational development.

### **Learning on both sides**

For NFD, the outcome was clear: a stronger, more structured HR foundation to support its growth.

Project Advisor Karen Lur noted, "I think the students have contributed to the outcome not only from research, but also by drawing on their internship experiences and offering perspectives as the younger generation whom NFD is keen to hire."

For the student-consultants, the project offered a valuable opportunity to apply academic learnings and frameworks to a real-world business issue. “Working on real business cases has strengthened our confidence in navigating future issues that we may meet in our line of work,” the team reflected.

Working with an SME required the team to balance analytical thinking with practical considerations. As the project progressed, the team recognised the importance of pacing organisational change. “We developed our recommendations and strategies by integrating the SME’s context with the insights and knowledge we gathered, and the shared vision for the SME,” they explained. “The feasibility of our solutions was shaped by an interplay of factors such as time, manpower, expertise and budget.”

The experience also reinforced the importance of collaboration. Each team member contributed unique perspectives and strengths, while the Project Advisor and Project Manager provided guidance to ensure alignment with both the client’s needs and programme standards.

“The team’s strong sense of ownership and accountability made a significant difference throughout the project,” said Program Manager Lina Lee. “With the guidance of a nurturing and knowledgeable HR subject matter expert serving as the Project Advisor, the team was well-supported at every stage.”



*From left to right: Karen Lur (Project Advisor), Seah Wei Jie Lincoln (Student-Consultant), Colonel Tan Jun Hao (Student-Consultant), Cindy Chan (NFD Director), Catherine Peh (NFD Office Manager), Carlene Heng (NFD Project Manager), Audrey Tan Zheng Xuan (Student-Consultant), Lina Lee (Project Manager)*



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