

Visit to FLB Group

22 January 2018

Meeting hosted by: Scott Ness and Susan Graham

Members in attendance: Colin Beattie

The FLB Group is the owner of the following three brands - Filofax (1921), the inventor of the “organizer”; Letts of London, the world’s oldest brand of diaries (1812); and Blueline, one of North America’s leading manufacturer of office supplies (1917). The company employs over 800 people in its four factories, owned and managed by the fourth generation of the Savoy family. Its two major markets are North America and Europe, but its planners, notebooks, are sold in more than 40 countries around the world.

The factory in Dalkeith has around 250 employees and produces 40% of all branded diaries. It exports to 75 countries across the world. Over 1,500,000 bibles are also made at the site in Dalkeith.

There is a commitment to continue to make products in the British Isles as this forms an important part of the company’s marketing strategy. There has been a heavy investment in branding, social media and improving the company’s online presence.

Workforce

Problems are faced by the aging workforce and new strategies are being put into place to ensure that the high-level of skills and expertise built are not lost from the company. Most of the trade is skilled and semi-skilled and training takes time. The previous apprenticeship programme stopped in 2011 due to the removal of the default retirement legislation as it was difficult to offer guaranteed secure work at the end of the programme, when employees were no longer retiring. Apprenticeships have now been re-introduced. They are also undertaking a large upskilling programme with current staff. Efforts have been made to increase the factory’s presence within the local area to encourage recruitment. Staff have worked with the local High School to promote potential career options at the factory, to school pupils in the area. The below table shows the age demographic of employees:

Age	Number of employees
Under 20	2
21-30	20
31-40	32
41-50	66
51-60	81
Over 60	33

Challenges

There has been a lack of investment in the site over the last 10 years. Investment is needed in the building structure, in machinery and in staff. Upgrading the fabric of the building will be very expensive and poses serious challenges for the business.

There was a feeling that sometimes the business doesn't qualify for enterprise agency support as it is neither a small nor large business. However, they are seeking advice on what support there may be available to improve energy efficiency, the building and equipment.

Import and export

Costs have increased in recent years as local raw materials are less readily available. There used to be a successful paper industry in the UK which no longer exists. Changes in currency have a substantial impact because almost all materials are now imported.

Skills

There was also a feeling that skills are no longer available locally as colleges such as Napier and Telford have stopped offering print industry qualifications. People who have been employed at the factory and need to learn new skills are now required to go to England in some cases for appropriate training. The question of older people taking on apprenticeships was also raised.