



Influencing organisation-wide change to reduce carbon emissions

Roger Robson-Williams had only recently taken on a .2 FTE role as chief Sustainability Officer at Plant & Food Research when he signed up for the Sustainability Leadership Programme (SLP). His first goal was to gather support to reduce emissions from international and domestic air travel – an ambitious plan that would impact many of the 1,000 staff at the organisation. His goal was to gradually introduce travel policy changes within 12-to-18 months.

Roger was part of the 2020 SLP cohort, which pivoted to online workshops due to Covid lockdowns. He says Andrea Thompson from Catapult, who led the course, helped the group understand that while disruption was challenging for many people, it can be the ideal time to push for change in an organisation.

“We learned that crises like the pandemic put organisations into a state of disarray, and in that state, people are often much more receptive to doing things differently,” says Roger. “So, inspired by that, I offered to refresh our travel policy immediately, given that nobody was actually able to travel, and because we were learning there was a lot we could do without travelling. We wanted to lock in those behaviours.”

“There’s no question in my mind that my successful advocacy for the policy to the senior leadership team was down to the influencing skills I picked up during the SLP course.”

Roger Robson-Williams – 2020 SLP Graduate

General Manager Science - Sustainable Production

Chief Sustainability Officer, Plant and Food Research

Roger's new policy integrates elements of SLP learning, particularly around collaboration and influencing skills. The new travel policy integrates a "decision tree" that gives each individual a choice to determine whether the benefits of their proposed travel outweigh carbon costs.

"Rather than saying to people, we just want you to travel less, it's a much more authentic position to say, we want you to think really hard about whether you definitely need to need to travel, and when you do we'll pay to offset the carbon emissions associated with that," says Roger.

The new travel policy was approved and implemented in just three months – even before Roger finished the SLP course – and well ahead of his initial plan of an 18 month roll-out. As a result, domestic travel emissions have reduced by approximately 66%, above any covid impacts.

Roger says the implementation of the carbon emissions reduction programme has already proven its worth at an organisational level.

"The Government announced a Climate Change Emergency on the 2nd of December, 2020, and committed the public sector to carbon neutrality by 2025. I think that Plant & Food Research is in a pretty good place to do our bit towards that now," says Roger.

"Had I not done the course, I think we would be playing catch up. That kind of preparedness is significant. I think it has helped to move Plant & Food Research towards a position of leadership rather than just compliance or catching up. We're not quite there yet, but that's where we're quite deliberately heading."

“I recommend the course to anybody with an inquiring and open mind and an interest in leadership. The material curated for the course is excellent, with a strong sustainability thread running through it all.”

Catapult

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