

Careers in packaging

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Sustainable profits

The packaging industry offers a microcosm of the corporate world when it comes to career opportunities. The broad range of careers available in plastics packaging manufacturing allows for extensive professional development, in a sector that is proudly embracing the vocal demands of the brands and consumers that are its active stakeholders. Not to mention the fact that the manufacturers themselves are keen to be sustainable from both a business and an environmental perspective.

This joint focus of responsibility allows for interesting careers across the various functions of a plastics packaging converter, as Anthony Langel, finance manager for Retal PA – the Pennsylvania, US facility of global plastics packaging producer Retal – knows only too well. Langel joined the company in 2019, having spent the majority of his early career in financial consulting to the IT industry. With a finance degree and an MBA that focused on the industrial sector, Anthony has more than a decade of experience in professional environments.

But what made him move into the packaging industry? “My initial finance career developed through consulting for small businesses that did not have their own financial department, which gave me a great insight into all aspects of finance for commercial operations as well as a real ‘in at the deep end’ experience! I valued the chance to learn quickly and to speak directly with the people at the head of the businesses I was consulting for, as this meant I saw the workings of a range of types of company, from real estate to construction, to industrial.”

This close contact with decision makers has given Langel the chance to see how businesses can be more profitable, and how to action that in practical ways. He explains: “I have an affinity for cost accounting; revenue vs net costs, gross margin issues...lots of businesses can look at the money they’re bringing in without looking at the value. For example, with one client I realised that they were paying a per diem on payroll for armed security guards, yet this brought with it additional costs of insurance and added risk, and yet the need for armed security was not necessary. I like to find real world examples of how money is being spent and analyse if that is the most effective way; where figures cross over with value.”

Langel initially contacted Retal after seeing a job advert for a finance manager that he only had seven of the requisite 10 years’ experience for. Although not initially called for interview, the HR manager saw his clear career progression and set up an interview for a position when the previous finance manager left.

“I feel like we both benefited as I was able to show how keen I was to be part of a global business and the HR manager could see that I was positive and ready to learn more about the specifics of their business,” adds Langel.

Open to ideas

“Working in a global company means that there are a lot of ways of doing things,” admits Langel. “There are policies and standardised methods that have been proven to be effective, but I’m also finding an openness to new ideas. The Retal PA facility is a close-knit team and we’re the newest factory in the 19 worldwide, so we’re aligned to the global business, while being able to do the best we can for our own business.”

Chief executive of Retal PA, Darius Janulionis, calls Langel a self-motivated employee who takes great care to understand how things work before he finds a way to fix something. “Beyond solving problems, Anthony is especially skilled in thinking a few steps ahead of whatever we’re doing, which is particularly beneficial to us as a global company that works in partnership with household brands, because creating scalable processes is what allows us to be agile,” says Janulionis. “Anthony is the perfect person to support us in this because he understands effective standardisation so well.”

Working in the plastics packaging industry has brought Langel a far greater understanding of the role of the circular economy and how manufacturers such as Retal can positively influence this, particularly when working with multinational beverage brands.

“It’s very interesting and very satisfying. We have an active sustainability director and I liaise with him regularly, which I find both professionally and personally interesting,” says Langel. “For example, buying renewable energy can cost more from a finance point of view, but as a global business with forward-thinking sustainability targets, it makes perfect sense. So I can combine both by knowing that increasing our purchase of renewable energy will support the ongoing viability of that industry, as well as our own Corporate Social Responsibility targets. We are also active in increasing our use of recycled material; we can already manufacture preforms with up to 100 per cent rPET, and as more customers want it, the cyclical nature of the circular economy grows. It’s about that sweet spot between environmental sustainability and business sustainability; we all need to join up!”

Having grown up around southwest Pennsylvania, Langel is positive about Retal’s Donora location, which “allows us to be close to various densely populated areas within only a 500-mile radius”, meaning that the company can transport its products effectively.

“47 per cent of Americans live within 500 miles of Pittsburgh, where Donora is located. Our strategic location is great because Donora and our region generally has a strong industrial heritage so the knowledge is great, plus it means we can often transport our products more efficiently than those manufacturers in the Midwest, so we can be competitive on service and value,” he adds.

Determined to give back what he sees as his good fortune in finding a career that is both enjoyable and challenging, Langel often speaks with current students from his university to share how working in finance brings opportunities for progressive careers that go beyond ‘traditional’ accounting.

“I feel blessed to have found a career in a company that values me and my ideas as well as appreciating my skills. I feel obligated to share that and welcome opportunities to talk to students about the reality of working in plastics packaging industry.”