



ESPA

The Next Generation
of International Talent

Fieldwork Robotics is a fast-growing international start-up that is changing how growers harvest their crops. That requires fresh minds and scarce technical resources, so it turned to ESPA for help.



Time is a precious commodity in a fast-moving tech start-up, and Fieldwork is no exception.

An evolving working relationship

Rui Andres, CEO of Fieldwork Robotics has worked with ESPA since 2015. He first used ESPA to recruit a software engineering intern for its parent company Frontier IP, an asset management company which supports innovative University spinoff companies. Other internships followed in areas such as mechanical engineering and data science, and one intern was referred into another spinoff, MolEndoTech.

He saw no need to change strategy after stepping into his new role. So far, he has brought in two further interns into Fieldwork Robotics, one from Portugal and one originally from Japan, via ESPA.

Rui said: *“Over the years we have gained confidence and built a good relationship with ESPA. We have a good understanding between our team and the ESPA team. We want things that can run very smoothly and without any major hiccups. We have been very happy with the ESPA experience. It works really well so we keep doing it.”*

Seeking scarce skills and fresh ideas

As a technology start-up, the first phase of Fieldwork Robotics has focused on proving its technical capability, and it started commercial operations in 2022. Growth is now its purpose.

Innovators like Fieldwork are disrupting traditional markets and ways of thinking – and that requires a constant stream of new talent and ideas. Rui explained: *“ESPA has helped us access the talent we need. It is well known that the number of robotic engineers, AI engineers and machine learning engineers is not enough to cope with the demand in the UK. But we are accessing a wider pool of talent. It means we are competing with the likes of Amazon and Google, and that makes our life slightly harder. But we can attract people based on what we are doing and how unique it is, and its potential to become a very big company.”*



Fieldwork Robotics achieves a recruiting win:win with ESPA UK: Finding scarce talent and giving opportunities to technical European student interns.

The uniqueness of technology start-ups is a fundamental factor in its requirement for fresh ideas and individuals straight from universities. *“It is very helpful to be able to find people that are eager to join projects from the very early stages that nobody else can do.”*

It certainly creates an exciting environment for interns – Fieldwork Robotics is the only company in the world able to harvest fresh raspberries using robots, while environmental testing experts MolEndoTech can identify bacteria and pathogens in water in 30 minutes, not two days.

Overcoming resource constraints

As a small start-up team of 16 full time staff, Fieldwork Robotics has no in-house HR department. The senior team already bring a range of different technical expertise, but as the company scales the time required to identify, screen and onboard new recruits in technology-specific areas grows too.

Rui told us: *“We need to attract young talent from people who are going through their final studies. We could go direct to universities, but we don’t have enough HR resource to manage that. Having ESPA involved means someone can screen the candidates and find those that could integrate well within our culture.”*

He continued: *“It takes a significant amount of time to reach potential candidates, screen them, and do interviews. The way we operate with ESPA allows us not just to have access to talent, but also provides us with strong screening support. They already know which traits we are looking for in the people we take on.”*

With ESPA’s support, any problems so far encountered have been swiftly managed.

Talent and traits on trial

The benefits of internships over permanent recruitment include the ability to test individuals in the field, said Rui: *“This process allows us to have a taste and feel of the work of each person. It’s not about judging CVs but about judging people in the real environment and seeing how they approach a challenge and solve it.”*

There are some challenges in the international nature of the company’s recruitment process. However, with ESPA’s support, any problems so far encountered have been swiftly managed. Rui related one such instance: *“One intern working with us on a research project needed to visit a French grower, because we are targeting a global market. He had to take some photos, to be able to apply his machine learning algorithm. When he came back to the UK he was detained by immigration. Luckily, we had ESPA, so we contacted them immediately. We worked with them to prove that we were complying with all the legislation, and everything had been done properly. It After three hours, everything was back to normal. ESPA helps you deal with this kind of thing more easily.”*



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Swift but smart selection

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Rui stated: *“ESPA knows that I don’t want to interview more than five candidates for any role, so they go out and find the candidates and check them first. That saves my time, and a lot of effort is saved on dealing with international visa applications.”*

“We would otherwise spend a lot of hours trying to identify candidates and taking them through all the stages of recruitment. ESPA probably saves us half of that time in finding, qualifying, and screening applicants.”

Finding candidates that fit roles is of course only part of the challenge – although Rui has not encountered any major issues, he is philosophical about the realities of brining in any new staff:

“We have found that although someone might come over well in an internship interview, the proof is in the pudding. Only when start working can you see how good they are, how they react to, approach, and solve problems, and communicate with other people in the team. But there is no real way to spot that in an interview.”

Diversity and decision-making

While some firms recruit interns for their language skills, this is not the purpose at Fieldwork Robotics. Its small core team already includes nine nationalities and a diverse set of languages. The benefits it gains lie in the quality and diversity of their minds as well as technical skills. Rui described this: *“We have learned that by having different nationalities, we can get our heads around and solve problems in a very original way. I am Portuguese for example – the way I approach a problem is very different from the way a British or a German person might.”*

“With a positive, supportive, diverse culture we have found we build good things, challenge ourselves and that very original ideas come up.”

Unlike firms who bring interns in for clearly defined office roles, Fieldwork Robotics also needs a diversity of perspectives on different challenges. Rui stated: *“We tend seek interns when we are not sure how we should proceed on something. We bring them in to*

explore new functionalities or new ways of approaching problems, because typically, they tend to be more focused more on applied R&D. They play a role in helping us manage and mitigate risk in new projects.”

The benefits to company and to intern are mutual, believes Rui. He told us why he believes its interns gain particular benefits from seeing inside how a technology start-up operates: *“Being exposed to a start-up company means they are also exposed to and involved in decision-making in a way that would be rare in a bigger company. Business decisions are about a mix of different factors, such as risk, time to market, total costs, upside versus downside. These are things that engineers tend not to learn at university. Just like our employees, our interns are involved in these discussions. They see what’s behind each decision or each step that the company sees on its path to the market.”*

“It’s a win-win for us and the interns,” he finished.

Making global connections

Fieldwork Robotics intends to grow globally from its base in Cambridge. It has already established a branch in Norway and is working with growers in France, Portugal, with plans to expand into many other European and non-European countries in the next few years.

Although today its interns all come from Europe into the UK, Rui believes that in future they may be deployed more widely. *“We certainly intend to go back to ESPA and discuss our future plans, as I did in the previous company, and we may expand internships into other geographies.”*

He concluded: *“The ESPA approach helps us access new people and discover whether these people have a real connection to the business, as well as how they behave and what their key traits are. Our experience with this has been really good. We will keep using ESPA and the internship programme to carry on with our developments and find the pools of talent that we need to grow our business.”*



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