One is constantly amazed by the amount of information that is continuously being generated about the best way to get citrus fruit on the tree, and then onto the consumer’s plate.

One may think that after more than 100 years of growing and exporting citrus, the South African industry would know just about everything there is to know about how to grow it, pick it, pack it, and ship it.

But this is clearly not the case, with new technological developments, constantly changing market requirements and new production challenges, such as new pest pressures and changes in environmental conditions, giving impetus to the need for ongoing research and development, a function fulfilled very efficiently by the CRI.

Transferring the latest information and technology to growers and packhouses is another task that the CRI spends a lot of time and effort on, through study group meetings, the publication of Cutting Edge, the extension briefs in the SA Fruit Journal, and various other means. But once the new information is in the hands of the grower or packhouse owner, the job is still not done – after all, if it does not have an impact on the manner in which things are being done on the farm or in the packhouse, all was for nought.

What, then, is the most efficient and effective way to integrate new information and new technology into an existing operation?

When designing and planning skills development tools and interventions, this is a factor that we must constantly take into account. How specific does one get in skills development programs? Does one focus on the principles, and leave the application completely up to the learner? Will the learner have the wherewithal to correctly apply principles that he/she has learnt in the classroom? Will there be the necessary support in the workplace to assist him/her with this? In short: do we teach a worker to operate a pea sizer, or do we teach him the principles of fruit sizing and the manner in which equipment can assist in the process?

Outcomes-based education incorporates a much bigger skills component (practical application), together with underlying knowledge (principles), than previous learning systems, and allows us to find a balance between the two. Through learning activities, an essential component of competency assessments, the learners are encouraged to apply their knowledge as part of the learning process. This addresses the issue of formal program design, but it still leaves the workplace.

When workers have taken part in formal skills development programs, the workplace environment that they return to must allow them to apply their knowledge and, more importantly, to continue their learning. They must be encouraged to explore the various ways in which the information that they now have in hand can be applied, and to gain further insight and understanding.

When new technology and information becomes available in the workplace, what is required is precisely this ability to continuously develop new insight and understanding. A workplace that fosters lifelong learning is a workplace able to assimilate and integrate new information and technology efficiently and effectively.

What is the bottom line? Ensure firstly that workers and management understand not only how to do what they do, but also why they are doing it and the impact of their actions further along the value chain: when people understand the “why”, it allows them to change the “how” without upsetting the picking trailer too much. Secondly, cultivate a workplace with a culture of learning and where emphasis is placed on the importance of understanding.

For more information please contact us on (031) 313-3364 or visit us at www.citrusacademy.co.za.