



Transforming 'backyard' solutions into a **profitable business model**

Business focus story

Organic Plus Pte Ltd (formerly known as Baywater Engineering Pte Ltd) began as a backyard project during the COVID-19 pandemic. Faced with the high costs of chemical fertilisers, Robert Hay and his father, Steven, sought to develop a locally produced, organic and affordable solution to support their family.

MDF sat down with **Robert, Co-Founder and Director of Organic Plus**, to discuss the company's journey and the importance of investing in sustainable and practical solutions that contribute to a healthier community and planet.

Bula Vinaka Robert. Could you please share with us how your journey into the production of Organic Plus liquid compost started?

☞ My father liquidated a lot of his assets to afford a medical trip over to India. When we came back, we were on one of the last flights into the country before COVID shut down the borders. We didn't have a lot of savings left, or assets to help with income generation. The country was on lockdown so we couldn't really do jobs outside of the area where we live. So, we turned to backyard gardening to sustain ourselves, and healthy food was also important for my father's recovery. That's how it really came about.

We weren't happy that we had to pay ridiculously high prices for chemical fertilisers, which were not helpful for the soil anyway. It just so happened that at the same time, my dad's friend was looking for ways to treat his distillery waste.



*I did a lot of research and came across an article from an old rural farming magazine that talked about **biotechnology and how [it can] transform waste into organic fertiliser.***

So, I thought that would be a good option; to see if we can make something at home for ourselves. I contacted the editor, got the researcher's number and immediately gave him a call. I think he was excited that somebody was finding a commercial route to his research because I don't think his research was being commercialised. Literally the next day, his research papers were in my inbox. So, we started from there. Taking out scrap parts and old pool pumps, anything we could use to make it as close as possible to his research. We decided that

we could incorporate the distillery waste into that process as well. That wasn't used in his research, but it turned out really well. After a year and a half of trial-and-error research, we entered the market.

Did you face any early challenges in starting the business?

☞ The initial challenge was wrapping our heads around the concept of biotechnology and the use of bacteria. We have an extensive engineering background but that doesn't mean we know the first thing about bacteria. It was a huge learning curve to be honest, but it was a lot of fun to learn about. Biologically active fertiliser — it's being used in Africa a lot more, but in Fiji it's a fairly new concept. So, not only were we getting to grips with it ourselves but having to also teach the farmers about it as well. We made big batches of our product and would go to nearby Navua town on the back of the truck with a thousand litres and just give it away. There were huge lines that would come to us with empty bottles and ask us what it is and how it works. Our initial messaging was about the liquid compost being organic, sustainable, biologically active, full of microbes and good for the soil, but I think farmers were there to collect the product because it was free. I don't think our messaging was effective. That's what we were doing back in the day before MDF came along.

What did your partnership with MDF involve?

☞ MDF came onboard in 2022, initially to help us with marketing. It involved social media advertising as well as billboards, flyers, farmer field days, and filming testimonials. We were obviously not marketing geniuses and MDF was a big help. If you asked me in 2022, who do we sell to, I would have just said farmers.



When MDF came onboard, they did segmentation, down to the nitty-gritty on who the farmers are. That really helped us to adapt our marketing strategies towards different customers.

MDF helped us with the initial social media expenditure and that really got us over the curve and made it easier for us to get our message out there.

Our partnership also included hiring an extension officer, someone in that field who can talk to farmers as well as host farmer field days. The farmer field days have given us a chance to get face-to-face time with the farmers. Farmers are hard to sell to. They have shared firsthand some of their experiences with products that were marketed to them which destroyed their soil. A lot of farmers like to see things on Facebook but what really convinces them is when they see us face-to-face, talk to our staff and ask questions.

Distribution was also another challenge for us. Unlike overseas, we don't have huge central retail chains that focus on agriculture where staff can advise farmers on how to use products that they are selling. In Fiji, we have hundreds of little shops, and they don't really advise farmers on how to use a product. They just sell the products. Pricewise, there was also a lot of disparities in the beginning because our product is not price controlled like "synthetic" agricultural inputs, so when demand rose some people would charge upward of FJD50 (AUD34.60) for our five-litre bottle. It has become a lot easier now after MDF teamed us up with Post Fiji. They are good distributors for us. They have their own logistics system so we're jumping on the

back of that and that's allowed us to get our product out in the market and keep prices relatively consolidated to standard pricing.

Since MDF has come onboard, we've seen massive growth. We don't have a lot of data around 2022 but certainly from 2023 to 2024, we've seen 500 per cent growth in sales and a much higher brand trust.

In 2024 you joined the Fiji Enterprise Engine (FEE) program, which is also supported by MDF. What motivated you to join the business accelerator program?

 I saw it as an opportunity, not only for personal development, but I needed a foundation to build my business. I recognised early on that FEE would be that opportunity for me to build that foundation so I could make more effective decisions. It demanded a big commitment, especially living 45 minutes out of Suva and travelling back and forth to do the night classes twice a week for six months. I made the effort to take advantage of the mentorship and try to get as many hours with the mentors as I could.



Through the FEE program I've been able to understand my business from a strategic planning perspective, marketing and all the different elements that have come together to build that foundation. My business has grown significantly because of it.

We now have four full-time staff and three part-time staff during the peak season.

What are your future plans?

 2025 for us is a year for capital investment and expanding our operations. We've grown so much this year that we're at a stage now where we have a small team trying to run the company that is outgrowing our space and our operations. Right now, I do everything to do with business development, accounting, HR and marketing, so we're going to increase our production and administration staff. We're looking to hire a highly qualified extension officer as well.

Our future also includes expanding our product line, and we're looking at a dry product that is the equivalent of our liquid compost. I think we've built good brand trust with farmers, and we would like to build on that and expand our range. We're also looking at exports into the Pacific Islands. It's important for small Pacific Island countries to showcase that we can innovate. Our farmers are at the whim of international conglomerates. Fertiliser prices are tagged to international markets, so we don't have a say in what we have to pay for these sorts of things. When a crisis happens like the Russia-Ukraine war, it means that fertiliser prices are affected all the way down to the Pacific Islands and the livelihoods of our farmers are affected. It's important that we come up with solutions in our own backyard.

