



Round Table on Employee Recruitment and Retention

Summary of Discussion and Action Plan

January 2013

Background

Farm operators indicated that labour is the biggest investment for most farmers, and recruitment and retention of workers is a constant preoccupation for most farmers.

While individual farm employers and particular commodity groups may pursue certain avenues or practices to recruit or retain employees, there is currently no industry-wide recruitment or retention strategy within the agriculture industry on PEI. The main recruitment methods of individual operators were word of mouth, family and friends, followed by other methods such as government job bank, an Agriculture Employment Officer, newspaper ads, and other methods.

The issue of employee recruitment has been a high priority of the PEIAGSC and are attempting to address this through the Employment Services Project. 2013 marked the 8th year for the Employment Service and if usage is any indication of the need in the industry, then it is greater than it has ever been. In 2013, the employment service assisted 199 agricultural producers in finding farm employees. In 2012, the Council launched a new online job board which allows producers to register and post jobs, and Employees can also register and receive instant job notifications through email. While the service can be self-sufficient to a certain degree, the role of Employment Officers is invaluable to ensure that the right employees are matched with employers. There still many employers and employees who do not have access to the internet so phone calls and farm visits are still a key element of our Employment Services.

To gain a better understanding of the issues that agricultural producers are currently facing, the Council organized two round table sessions to discuss recruitment and retention issues, one in

Charlottetown on Thursday, January 17th, 2013 and one in Summerside on Wednesday, January 30th, 2013. The sessions were well attended by industry and commodity leaders. After a presentation by David MacKay, which served as background information of the issues, a lively discussion followed. While there the issues around recruitment and retention are more easily identified, solutions are less so. However, the information gained from the sessions will allow the Council to develop future action plans to address very specific issues identified.

Discussion

The discussion had several main themes emerge as follows:

- Many operators believed that the prevailing negative image of agriculture is a major barrier to recruitment of new workers. The Agriculture Certificate course offered at 3 Island High Schools has had some success in bringing young energetic youth to work on farms, and some of these youths see a career in agriculture. If this program was Island wide in all High Schools, more youth would be exposed to agriculture.
- The nature and role of women working in agriculture was discussed. Employers noted that they may not be recognizing and/or utilizing the skills and abilities of women to their full potential, and even though women generally are excellent farm workers they (employers) don't make any special effort to recruit women workers or support women's skill development
- Given the worker recruitment and retention challenges, employers indicated that they have taken a number of steps to complete the work through means other than hiring additional workers. These steps included: employers did more work themselves; farms became more mechanized (new equipment); family members did more work; more specialized tasks were contracted out (e.g., crop scouting, pressure washing and disinfection); the amount of commodities produced changed; or the overall size of the operation was decreased.
- Millennial workers – One issue that many of the participants stressed as an emerging issue was that of dealing with the new “Millennial Worker”. Whether it was work ethics, dependability, or ability to work long hours, these worker characteristics (or lack of) always came back to those in the millennial worker category.
- Both farm employers and farm workers noted an increasing need for more structured training opportunities within the industry as a whole. Employers indicated that agriculture has been facing major trends that require the farm operator to be more prepared than ever before. With regard to their workers, many farm operators have ‘mixed feelings’ about worker training. They recognize that there is an increasing need

for worker training from a farm productivity, farm safety and food security standpoint; however, many tend to see training as a cost rather than an investment.

- Farm operators are encouraging and supporting their employees to take various training courses. Training programs specific to new equipment and farm technology, truck driving (Class 3A), environmental and food safety regulations, and safety and first aid training are among the main areas identified by employers. An increasing consumer interest in the quality and safety of food products (regulations and food safety standards); farm operators will need to have employees who are 'tuned into' customer service issues, and are trained and experienced in food safety standards.
- Employers were also critical of the issue of linking eligibility for training costs to EI eligibility. They viewed this as a barrier to accessing training dollars to assist with training for their existing workforce.

The PEIAGSC collects information about employees (age, gender, skills, etc.) from employees using the Council's Employment Services. In 2012, 60% of farm workers could be described as millennial workers (34 years of age and under) and 47% of male farm workers had either completed university or had some university while 32% of females had completed university or some university. This highlights the need for developing strategies targeted at this demographic. By all estimates, this issue will continue to grow, and the industry will need to develop strategies to dealing with this group

Human Resource Practices (Tips and Suggestions)

While solutions to the recruitment and retention of farm workers can be complex and varied, a number of employers mentioned several emerging human resource practices that are proving to be successful in recruiting and retaining workers, and they include the including:

- Offer competitive wage and benefit package; and be aware of what other sectors are offering. The Council has been successful in capturing at least a snapshot of industry average wages and what is known is that agriculture does offer wages that at least competitive if not better than other sectors.
- Develop and practice a positive work/life balance philosophy; e.g., regular work hours, flexibility around hours and work shifts, split shifts, etc. This was a reoccurring theme for the millennial workers.
- Create more full-time (and/or longer term) employment for workers, thus allowing the farm operation to retain the more critical, skilled and experienced staff; explore the option of 'cross training' farm workers so that they can move between various types of farm jobs and operations at different times of the year. Again, this seemed to be a

theme for millennial workers who thrive in a multi-task environment changing their duties up as much as possible.

- Include workers, particularly the Farm Supervisors and Specialized Livestock Workers, in the planning, consultation, and decision-making part of the business; this builds interest and commitment to the farmer and the farm operation. E.g., an equipment operator should have input into the purchase of any new machinery.
- Build a team approach; provide opportunities for the farmer and key farm workers to come together and understand the new information, technology and advances emerging in a particular commodity. Provide a great understanding of industry issues, such as quota systems, food safety, etc.
- Invest more time and effort in working with and communicating with employees; look for little (and perhaps less costly) ways to reward good workers; things like subsidizing gas/transportation costs, provide some perks (coffee, occasional lunches), a Christmas bonus, an annual company 'get together,' or end of harvest barbeque.
- Become more open to employing individuals and/or groups who traditionally have been underrepresented in the labour force; i.e., persons with disabilities, newcomers/immigrants, and older/retired persons.

Support for these practices by farm workers is really not known, and for that matter their motivations to work in agriculture, or other sectors, is not really understood.

Next Steps (Action points)

Recruitment and retention of farm workers will continue to be a critical piece of human resource management on the farm. While there were many clearly defined problems, solutions are more difficult to define and develop solutions for. These initial Round Table sessions were an excellent forum for identifying some of the problems and did generate some initial steps and actions to address some of the problems:

- Provide opportunities for women to develop more skills on farm. One good suggestion was to offer Class 3A for women only. Several producers knew that of women that work on their operations in areas of grading and packaging who could/would be interested in learning to drive trucks, which would also put them in a higher income generating potential and offer room for advancement within the organization.
The PEIAGSC will investigate holding Class 3A training for women only, this year. It will investigate partnering with PEI Trucking Sector Council and other women's groups to see if it is possible to find financial assistance for the participant's share of the course, which is a barrier to their participation.

- In an effort to reduce training costs, the PEIAGSC continues to conduct environment scans of potential training funds at a best possible cost to employers/employees. In response to a demand for forklift training, the council has obtained funding from Farm Credit Canada/Canada Agriculture Safety Association to conduct a fork lift training campaign to train up to 100 participants at a cost to participants of only \$30.00 which will take place in March/April of 2013
- The PEIAGSC will investigate the possibility of an On Farm Food Safety Training session for farm workers with possible delivery in fall of 2013.
- Development of a more robust HR toolkit for farm employers which provides an off the shelf resource for everything from hiring and disciplining an employee. This would build on other resources such as the Council's recently published Employee Hiring Manual
- The PEIAGSC plans on continuing to provide the employment services to farmers in 2013 while expanding on the opportunity to use that service to identify deficiencies in the training of farm employees
- And finally, the Council will make every effort to develop resources on how to work effectively with millennial workers. This may involve bringing in expert resource people to hold an industry wide training day with the ultimate goal of having specific strategies to deal with millennial workers within each commodity. This will/should include engagement with employees this year to find out what could motivate them to work in agriculture.

Conclusion

In terms of current and future labour supply, all data sources describe a tightening labour market; one that will become more challenging for the agriculture sector in the decade ahead. However, it is not likely that the industry will face a sudden or abrupt labour 'crunch'; rather the impacts will likely continue to be of a gradual or incremental nature, and at the more experienced worker levels (farm managers, livestock workers, herdsman). This is 'good news' for the industry in that it will allow the industry time to design and implement strategies to address these impending shortages.

Round table discussions, such as the two recently held, provide an opportunity for industry to share issues in regards to recruitment and retention. This information sharing is invaluable to developing the solutions to these issues and ultimately the industry will need to work together to implement some of these new initiatives.

The Council appreciates all those who participated in the Round Table Discussions and look forward to sharing with the industry some of the initiatives that will result from your efforts.