

Attracting and Retaining Young People in the Pastoral Industry

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Editor: *This is a summary of the presentation that John gave at the Gascoyne Youth Muster in mid-September 2006. Table groups worked on some possible solutions to issues raised in John's talk, and these ideas are being collated, for distribution to participants, by the Pastoral Lands Board.*

Introduction

Attracting and retaining people is perhaps the greatest 'internal' challenge facing the pastoral industry today. The industry is faced with an ageing workforce and fewer skilled people, and is operating in a fiercely competitive labor market. But you are not alone. The same problems are being experienced in other agricultural sectors, other industries (eg. mining), and in other countries (eg. NZ). Indeed, it's ironic that the mining industry held a conference on a similar topic, just over two years ago, in Perth.

Turnover

Turnover can be expensive (eg. in lost knowledge, declining staff morale and the real costs of finding a replacement). However, some turnover is not a bad thing. It's an important source of 'new blood', and without it entrenched ideas can develop that will stifle innovation. Factors influencing staff turnover fall into two categories – factors that are largely within an employers' control (eg. attracting, selecting, retaining staff) and factors outside their control (eg. work-home conflict, decision to leave, job searching, alternative opportunities). In analyzing any issues in this area it's important that we identify the cause of the problem rather than a symptom. For example, it's easy to blame someone's decision to leave on (say) the mining industry, while the real cause is employee dissatisfaction – and that's largely controlled by the employer or manager.

Attracting people

Competition for good people is fierce. Employers in the pastoral industry face additional impediments in attracting people, such as the negative image and perception of agriculture, and the lack of understanding of opportunities, achievements and change in the industry. These challenges highlight the needs for all to take responsibility for lifting the image of agriculture in the regions and in the cities, to lift people management skills so that pastoral managers become an 'employer of choice', and to work together to attract people to a region. This also highlights the need to retain the 'good people' once you've got them.

Recruiting people

More than any other stage, this influences the outcome – ‘the right people for the right job’. In matching a person to a job, it’s important to have defined the job carefully. Start with your business goals, and identify the key skills to grow that particular business. The next step is to have a clear idea of what the job entails, including competencies, skills, behaviour and attitudes; keeping in mind that you can teach skills but attitude is a lot, lot harder. To expand on this, personal qualities critical to future success, as identified by pastoralists and agency staff from across Australia, include (in declining order of importance): commitment and passion, sensitivity to other values and aspirations, strong interpersonal skills, strong communication skills, practical, self confident, adaptable, positive attitude to change, thinking ability, willingness to learn, determination, open-minded, networked and connected, and innovative. Few people are likely to be strong in all of these, and this highlights the importance of valuing the strengths of different family members and the importance of ‘teams’. If you are an employer, you might consider these qualities in selecting and developing staff, and if you are an employee you might consider developing particular areas to improve your prospects.

When you get to interviews, identify work preferences and ask what the person wants from the job. Do your referee and qualification checks, and if there’s any doubt, don’t! You might try and accommodate the needs of a good applicant, and once you’ve appointed them lead them through a proper induction so that performance and quality standards and other expectations are understood, and involve the new employee in social and community events right from the start.

Retaining people

It’s not all about money! People leave people, not jobs, and the reasons given why people leave jobs in the agricultural sector are (in descending order of importance): 1. unhappy with management (eg. failure to explain clearly, poor attitude, lack of interest in employee needs); 2. no recognition or thanks; 3. limited career/development opportunities; 4. inadequate salary and incentives/benefits (eg. use of a telephone in private, internet access, use of farm vehicles); 5. bored; and 6. other (eg. lack of social contact with the opposite sex, lack of emotional support).

The solutions to these problems could include: 1. becoming a better manager (eg. through further education, but at least be approachable, listen, keep confidences); 2. provide reasonable remuneration and workplace conditions; 3. provide good people management (eg. don’t take people for granted; challenge and coach them to help them perform to their best); 4. develop and maintain a positive workplace culture (eg. incentives, recognition, celebrate achievements); and 5. encourage learning.

Conclusions

Attracting and retaining young people is a complex and important issue for the pastoral industry. Key steps include: making the industry more attractive to people who want to work in a valued and respected sector; being more professional as people managers (eg. know yourself as a manager and upskill, understand what people want from a job today, accommodate employees needs); and working cooperatively for regional solutions. It also seems inevitable that industry will also have to think seriously about technology that might replace some jobs, and about immigrant labour and ways of harnessing mid-life career changers and the 'grey army' who are increasingly attracted to the pastoral regions.