

RECRUITING AND TRAINING EMPLOYEES

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ABSTRACT

Swine producers are implementing recruiting and training programs in response to a changing labour market. Competing industries are increasingly tempting our workers with wages, incentives and air-conditioned work environments. Finding, hiring, and retaining the best employees on hog farms in Ontario is becoming a number one priority. A number of recruiting and training best practices can be applied to the hog industry.

RECRUITING

Job Descriptions

A comprehensive recruiting program requires a thorough understanding and description of the job that is to be filled. To begin, the producer writes down the skills and competencies that are required to be successful on the job. These skills and competencies are divided into beginner, intermediate and advanced levels. A written job description contains the duties, position requirements, wages, and working conditions. This helps the producer and the applicant to be very clear about their expectations.

Competing Industries

The producer, in addition, must be aware of the competing industries in the local area that draw workers away from his company. An analysis of the competing industries, their skill requirements, wage scales, working conditions, and their opportunities for career advancement help the producer to position his place of employment in a favourable light.

Recruiting Program

The actual recruiting program includes various options: advertisements, job fairs, and formal training programs. Advertising in media today takes many forms, such as, newspapers, online job banks, and trade publications. Secondary schools and colleges hold job fairs at which producers can explain their job opportunities and the rewards of working at their companies. Colleges with swine training programs produce a small cadre of workers, but these students come into the workforce with the expectation of making swine production their full-time careers. To date, swine apprenticeship programs in Ontario have not obtained sufficient enrolment to run. High schools with co-operative education programs do not traditionally

have an agricultural placement component, however, producers who have contact with active 4-H programs may find young people through this group.

Current swine recruiting programs have been introduced on an “as needed” basis. Recruitment strategies are pulled out when someone quits. The problem with this strategy is that it typically takes about 52 days for a new employee to become fully productive, and that is assuming that a qualified replacement worker is found quickly.

Human Resource Service Providers

In today’s world, recruitment in every industry is a full-time occupation. With the baby-boomer generation approaching retirement, and Generation X having fewer numbers, all industries are facing a worker shortage. Until very recently, Ontario producers could apply to the Canadian government to sponsor qualified offshore workers for one to three years. However, in November 2006, the law was tightened, so importing long-term workers has become much more difficult. Producers are finding that the worker shortage requires them to put in long hours in the barn, and they are left with little daylight hours to work on recruitment. Hence, those producers, who focus their time on production, hire a human resource provider to recruit qualified workers and supply training for existing workers.

TRAINING

Skills and Attitude Training

There are two components to a strong training program: skills and attitude. A strong training program can build skills by guiding the worker through a series of exercises over time. Skills can generally be taught, but attitude is less of a training issue and more of a cultural fit issue. Helping a new worker fit into the culture of your company is part of the manager’s job. Most producers look for a person with a positive attitude and a teamwork approach and coach to develop the necessary skills for the job.

In a perfect world, we would have more workers who want to work in primary agriculture. It is rewarding to work with livestock and to be able to move freely around the workplace. We need to do a better job of promoting our industry. There are many people who are interested in working with livestock, but they lack training, and producers, who are already stretched from time constraints, are reluctant to invest the six to twelve months necessary to train them, only to have them leave for more money elsewhere. It’s a Catch-22. If we don’t train them, then we don’t have the workers. If we train them, they may leave for more money elsewhere. Most producers opt for training workers and identifying meaningful rewards.

Employee Training

A successful training program takes the worker from his/her current skill level, and provides daily coaching to move him/her to the next level. Each task is broken down into small steps that must be practiced at least six separate times until it is fully mastered. Even skilled

workers may need to learn more than one way to complete a task based on the company's processes. Sometimes, it is more difficult to retrain an experienced worker from another swine company than to train a green worker who has never worked with hogs before. The important element here is attitude. Again, we note that people with a positive attitude can be trained quite easily, but people who are negative or resistant to change become a burden to the workplace.

EMPLOYEE RETENTION ISSUES

There are numerous issues involved in employee turnover (low employee retention). McEwan's 2004 swine labour study found that pay (wages plus benefits) and weekends off were the main reasons for leaving. Human resource exit interviews also indicate that people leave for health reasons, the desire for career advancement (possibly in another industry), and poor management/supervision practices. Today, we will explore four issues: job satisfaction, wages and hours, and career paths.

Job Satisfaction

Research into job satisfaction has found that most workers are highly concerned about how their managers/supervisors treat them. Workers want to be appreciated for their contribution, and they expect to be treated fairly. The farm is a workplace, and workers must be treated with respect, as they would be in any workplace. Managers and supervisors often move into these positions because of their technical skills, but may lack the formal training required to manage or supervise staff. They may not have acquired project and time management skills. They may be unfamiliar with training and coaching principles. These management skills are as essential to the workplace as production skills. The business of farming is more complex than ever, and producers, managers and their workers require training to keep their skills current.

Wages and Hours

Workers expect to be paid fairly for their work. Young workers entering the labour market may be satisfied with entry-level wages for a short time, but workers with families want and need a sustainable wage. Knowing the competing industries in your local area helps the producer to set wages that are comparable based on skill-sets and experience.

Workers want some level of work-life balance, so they have quality time with their families and friends. Arranging the workday and the workweek according to effective time management practices helps to complete the jobs in a timely manner and allows the worker to have personal time as well. This includes arranging schedules for weekends and holidays off. Most producers have enough staff to rotate weekends and holidays off among them. Again, understanding the competing industries in your local area helps producers to review their options and set policies to retain good workers in the swine industry.

In Ken McEwan's 2004 swine labour study, low turnover farms (0% turnover in last 2 years) and high turnover farms (more than 70% turnover in last 2 years) were compared. Employees on low turnover farms worked fewer hours and received more time off (i.e. more weekends off, statutory holidays, vacation days) than employees on high turnover farms. Employees on low turnover farms also received higher wages.

Career Paths

Finally, to increase worker retention for the long-term, producers need to develop potential career paths. Workers want to feel that they have a future with your company, otherwise after gaining experience at your company, they will move on. McEwan notes that employee turnover costs \$8409 per person, given the lost time between workers and the lost productivity of getting new workers up-to-speed. It is far more cost effective to invest in training and retaining good workers than to deal with employee turnover issues and lost production.

CONCLUSIONS

Hog producers are increasingly hiring non-family workers, which brings a new dimension to the business of farming. Human resources, the skills of recruiting, managing, and training employees, have moved to the forefront of operating a successful business. As in every business that has five or more employees, experience and training have to blend with teamwork and cooperation to meet competitive production goals. Developing and implementing a recruiting plan requires thought and planning. Not every applicant for your job will fit in well with existing workers. First, producers look for a positive work attitude, and second, train for skills. A strong training program is well planned and consistent. Managers and supervisors are trained in how to train and coach their employees. They are trained in how to communicate and supervise employees. Employees are expected to learn tasks within a skill structure. This structure categorizes skills by levels. Each new skill level builds upon previous successes, creating career paths for employees. Workers are shown potential career paths within the company and offered wages and incentives that encourage job retention.

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