

FOREIGN WORKERS ON DAIRY FARMS

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During the past few years the media have carried several stories about foreign workers on dairy farms. Usually, the employer has not come out smelling of roses. So, because every story tends to have two sides, I went to talk to farmers who employ foreign workers. This is a summary of what they told me.

It is no news that it is getting more difficult to find workers – any workers – let alone good, keen staff. This, in itself, could explain why farmers are looking to import workers. But, to my surprise, I found that many farmers actually prefer to employ workers from outside New Zealand. We will discuss the reasons a little later. Let us first be clear as to what we are talking about.

By foreign workers we obviously mean non-New Zealanders. However, they are not simply one group of people. There are three main groupings – not including a fourth group which was sometimes mentioned, i.e. North Islanders who have moved South. After all, we have to draw the line somewhere! The three groups are:

Work experiencers

Work experiencers are young people (usually) who come here with a work permit to work for six months or a year.

These youngsters are often, but not always, from a dairy farming background. They tend to be keen, energetic, eager to learn. They bring with them new ideas and knowledge of other countries, interesting food, new perspectives, and they engage well with other staff members. Their insights into life in New Zealand have been an eye-opener to local young people; as they say, we do not know how lucky we are! They work hard and play hard. Lifelong friends have been made.

The fact that this group of young people has earned themselves a good reputation probably says something good about the people, consultants or employers, who recruited them. However, there have also been a few problems:

- The fact that herds in New Zealand are arguably the largest in the world seems to pose a problem. After all, if you are used to milking six cows, then a herd of 1400 represents a pretty big challenge!
- Hygiene has been mentioned
- It seems that ancient wars have been resurrected many years after, on farms thousands of miles away from where the conflicts actually happened. Sure, this can be an instant history lesson but it can also impact on productivity
- Language can be a problem, especially when somebody has to move fast
- Gender issues have been mentioned.

However, by and large, these youngsters seem to be a delight to have around. Because there are mainly consultants and experienced employers involved in recruiting this group I have little advice to offer here. The system seems to be working well.

Immigrants

Immigrants are people who have consciously chosen New Zealand as their new home and have moved here in reasonably good order. They have usually done their homework and, although nothing can really prepare one for the reality of life in a new country, they are usually willing to develop a new loyalty. They bring with them the most precious gift they have for their new country: their children. It can take them a while to adjust, but employers usually do all they can to help the newcomers.

Immigrants tend to be somewhat older than work-experiencers. They are often married or in a partnership. Many have families. This has advantages and disadvantages:

- On the positive side, it is through their children going to school that they move into the community
- Older workers tend to be stable, responsible, thoughtful, less interested in beer, girls/boys and fast cars. After work they go home to their families, where they have a support system and company
- Often the wife or partner is an extra worker, housekeeper or resource for the community
- Of course, though, the farm needs to be able to offer suitable housing and access to facilities for family members
- Having immigrants around is like having a living lesson in geography and how other countries live and function.

However, the maturity of immigrants can work against them:

- People used to doing things in a certain way can find it difficult to adapt
- If they were in charge before it can be difficult to accept authority
- If the partner or children are unhappy you will probably lose your employee even though he/she may be very happy in the job
- Immigrant families do not usually stay in the first few jobs for long; they tend to move around a little before settling down
- Cultural issues can be a problem unless there is enough trust and good communication to sort them out.

The main problem with immigrants seems to be that some farmers who should be giving it a try have not been willing to employ them. This is a pity because they do represent a good potential source of labour **provided** the employers do their homework. Proper, thorough screening, reference checks (why should it daunt you to do a reference check in another country?) and a well-prepared interview or series of interviews can bring you a really good motivated worker or avoid an expensive mistake. Several experienced employers have developed a comprehensive application form (also

called a disclosure form) which is a useful guideline when preparing an interview. And, if you need help or are inexperienced, use a consultant, at least at first.

Potential difficulties

Some topics to be discussed, besides the obvious ones relating to experience, could be:

- Do find out, in detail, how the partner and family feel about living on a farm. (Living on a farm in Sweden is not the same as living on a farm near Waimate!)
- What are their interests, aspirations and needs? (A child who is a violin prodigy will need lessons. Are you within reach of a teacher?)
- What do they like to eat? (It can be awkward to feed vegetarians in Culverden!)
- Do they play rugby or are they part of the 90% of the world who prefer soccer? What about recreation?
- What are their country of origin's cultural and historic attitude to cows and milk products? How many cows have they actually milked? By hand or with a machine?
- What about religious observances and working on religious holidays?
- Gender issues should be addressed. In New Zealand it is common for women to be in positions of authority. This is not necessarily the case in other countries
- Language could be a constraint, but immigrants usually learn fast. And even people from other English-speaking countries have to get used to Kiwi English! Also (and this applies to all foreign workers) remember that when one speaks a foreign language, you are continually translating your thoughts. This could make it difficult to get to the point.

Remember that applicants need the security of a job more than anything else. They will try to please and impress you. Only if you create a trusting relationship during the interview will they feel safe enough to tell you the truth.

Refugees or de facto refugees

The third group of employees are people who had to leave their homes in a hurry. Recent examples are Zimbabweans, some other Africans and people from central Europe. New Zealand is a country of immigrants, and traditionally New Zealanders have been very willing to lend a hand to someone who desperately needs help. A number of refugees have ended up on dairy farms. Sometimes it has worked out and sometimes it has not. The main thing to understand is that these people come from situations of recent and sometimes terrifying loss. Often they are unable or unwilling to talk about them because of fear of losing control. But, having your animals knee-capped (so they stay alive but cannot run away), your house burnt, your life's work destroyed, your dogs tortured, and your family threatened or killed is not something anyone forgets in a hurry. Loss of concentration, nightmares, relationship problems, 'naughty' kids and a general preoccupation with

issues not related to work are only to be expected. These folk have all the issues and problems that immigrants experience and more, because they never had time to prepare themselves for the big jump.

It is easy to decide that, from an employer point of view, these people represent too big a risk. Clearly, they will demand special help and nurturing. On the other hand, there have been employers who have offered a home and a job to refugee families. Sometimes it just did not work out. The new employee starts working but very soon (usually in the middle of calving) moves on, leaving the employers regretting their good intentions.

On the other hand, a number of these placements have worked out very well. To me, the surprising thing is that those farmers who actually had unsatisfactory employment experiences do not seem to regret it. On the contrary, they tell me that, although the experience of dealing with this or that family was time-consuming and emotionally demanding, they learnt so much in the process that it was really all worth it. They say things like

- My family learnt a lot about compassion and helping others
- My staff are working harder and there is less griping. They now seem to understand how lucky they are to live in this country and to have a job
- These people have really been through hell. I have discovered that I can deal with traumatised people — a dimension of myself that I did not know
- My whole family moved closer together in trying to help, particularly my wife and I
- I am now a better employer. I understand more about how people work and what motivates them.

These are not things one learns from reading a book!

If doing your homework is important in employing an immigrant, it is **imperative** if you are considering employing a refugee. One really needs to take time to get to know them and work through the layers of loss, grief, bewilderment and present need. I think it is something worth doing. If you feel out of your depth, or if the family really seems to need more help than you can give them, please consider involving a counsellor or family therapist. You are, after all, a farmer. Nobody expects you to be a psychologist as well.

There seems to be a polarity developing in the dairy industry. Good, competent employers have never had trouble getting staff and the availability of foreign workers simply increases their choice. Many experienced employers prefer to employ foreign workers. They say it makes life interesting and they get workers with a better work ethic. On the other end, bad or indifferent employers are, as always, having to take what they can get. It worries me that foreign workers who are vulnerable to exploitation too often end up with employers who just do not care. The difference lies simply in acquiring the skills necessary to be a good employer: proper, thorough recruitment and screening processes, knowing how to motivate and use authority, setting up a proper career path, and letting go in good order when the time is right.