

SETTING THE STANDARD- SO TODAY'S STAFF ARE WITH US TOMORROW

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Where will our future employees come from?

There are five sources from which the agricultural industries labour will predominantly come in the future:

1. Unemployed
2. School leavers
3. Career changers
4. Migration within the sector
5. Immigrants

The short term challenge for many employers is simply to get enough applicants of a suitable quality to select from. Once that occurs, employers must then match the right person to the role, recognizing that each of these sources brings its own unique advantages and disadvantages.

What is the industry doing to improve supply of employees?

ATR Solutions Ltd is a Cambridge based company focused on people and promotion issues on behalf of New Zealand Dairy farmers. We deliver two projects that are specifically designed to address two of the above labour sources.

Window to dairying in New Zealand

The Window to Dairying in New Zealand program is an initiative funded by Dairy InSight on behalf of all New Zealand Dairy Farmers. It is designed to improve the understanding and awareness of school leavers (and the persons that influence them), about the realities and opportunities within the Dairy Industry.

Notes:

The flagship activity is the on-farm career day events, run in nine regions across the country every year in March when the dairy industry is in full swing. High Schools within each region have the chance to send along students, teachers and careers advisers. For the second year running these events also cater for potential career changers as well.

Each year a new catch phrase is developed, which attempts to capture the essence of the messages being provided:

- The dairy industry, ‘We not only grow grass, we grow great people and great careers’
- Change your view of farming, because the face of farming has changed.

March 2006 saw five events hosted in the North Island and four in the South Island. In total there were 895 attendees from 112 schools. There were also many guests, training providers, session presenters and speakers involved on the days, bringing the total number involved in the nine events to 1,260 people.

All events were extremely successful and these numbers indicate a 40% increase in attendance over the 2005 round of events. However the most important result is the feedback that is received from attendees:

“Great idea to have the teachers in a group of their own - nice to listen/do without the worry of student participation. A wonderfully informative and **friendly** day! Keep up the good work. My students thought it was excellent.”

Careers advisor at 2006 Northland event

“An excellent day - extremely valuable for myself and my future teaching. You've almost tempted me away from teaching. The organisation of the day was superb. Well done!”

Careers advisor at 2006 Southland event

“I thought that the day was really well done. I learnt more information and I want a job on a dairy farm, so this day helped.”

Student from 2006 North Canterbury event

Over the last two years, a pilot project named “Dairy Kids” was delivered under the Window to Dairying brand. The aim of this pilot was to investigate the promotion of the dairy industry to primary and intermediate school age children through an on-farm visit. This year, five of these were conducted and monitored which saw 329 students, teachers and parents on-farm for a day experiencing dairy farming first hand. The feedback received from the farmers, teachers and students suggests this is an extremely worthwhile concept:

“Highly recommend the program- kids are still talking about it and have retained heaps of learning.”

Teacher from Omanu Intermediate School

Lets talk dairying

For the past four years Dairy InSight has, on behalf of New Zealand Dairy Farmers, conducted a promotional campaign to promote the contribution of the dairy farming industry to the public. The 2006 “Go Dairy” campaign was further developed to target people between the ages of 25 and 40 who were considering a change of career. The campaign used real dairy farmers (not actors) who have made the change to farming from other careers in a series of television, print and radio advertising.

ATR Solutions have been contracted for the last two years to provide the Managed Response service behind the 0800 Go Dairy number. This service is responsible for ensuring: 1) that all qualified respondents are contacted and provided with appropriate information about the dairy industry; 2) that they are aware of the realities of the industry; and 3) that any decision on their part to change careers was made for the right reasons and with the best information.

In essence the Managed Response service is about mentoring and supporting people to improve their transition into the dairy industry and limiting the risk of them choosing the wrong job.

This year, those respondents who are identified as a real prospect of entering the industry are also given the chance to go on-farm for a day and experience what dairying is really about, on one of 30 farm sites available throughout the country.

Further to this, those people who are committed to finding a job are offered ongoing specialist support to reduce the risk of them making the wrong job selection. At all times the responsibility for making decisions and taking action is left with the client.

Everyone who rings the 0800 Go Dairy number is logged and assessed according to the purpose of their call. The highest priority is given to people genuinely interested in changing careers.

Notes:

Callers are immediately sent a brochure providing details about careers, employment and training in the Dairy Industry.

Each potential career changer is also phoned by a trained client manager (who is a dairy farmer) to discuss the realities of what dairy farming involves, including types of work, career pathways, and what is required to progress and succeed.

Potential career changers are also directed to www.dairyinsight.co.nz.

Career changers interested in pursuing a career in dairying are able to access additional support in making the best possible decision. This includes the opportunity to spend a day on-farm, and ongoing support from a specialist in identifying and selecting the right job for their needs.

Throughout the campaign every person is able to maintain contact with the service and come back for as much support as they require.

All the career changers looking for jobs are encouraged to use the “Fencepost” website, in the rural jobs listings, so that all farmers have access to them.

Throughout the campaign, data is continually being captured and recorded to assist in both understanding and managing clients, and measuring the results achieved.

Calls to the 0800 Go Dairy number are not limited to career changers. We also receive a significant number of calls from school leavers and others, including existing industry employees.

What influences peoples views of farming as a career?

Farm employers and employees were asked during the development of the Employment Health Assessment resource (completed by ATR Solutions) to identify the key issues that needed to be addressed to improve the labour supply on-farm.

Clearly, farmers saw that it was the on-farm factors which had the biggest impact on the industry’s labour supply, and this is consistent with the attitudes of many non-participants who do not see the industry as a good career choice.

Figure 1 shows the issues and number of times they were discussed during the workshops.

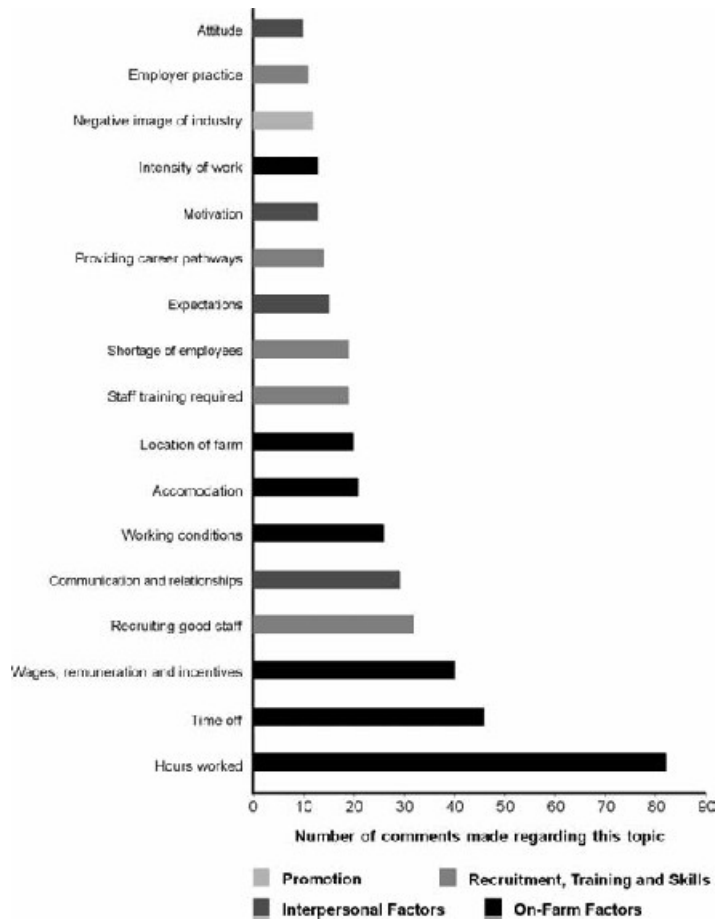


Figure 1: Issues and number of times discussed

The following comments are a snapshot of the discussions that were held during the workshops, but give an insight into some of the issues identified. Copies of the full report are available from ATR Solutions, or Dairy InSight who supported and funded this work on behalf of New Zealand Dairy Farmers:

Notes:

- Hours of work on-farm were acknowledged to be unsociable and longer than some careers, but farmers saw ways in which these could be improved through simple planning and management techniques. Also, it was noted that farming was not the only career where people work long hours in order to progress.
- Time off provision for staff by many employers had clearly improved with frequent breaks being given through the use of smart rosters and sleep ins. Achieving good time off within the Dairy Industry was shown to be possible and warranted employees taking time to discuss the working conditions on farm.
- The need to better understand the whole remuneration package was identified, in order to make comments about how well the industry pays. In general it was felt that in most cases the industry remunerated employees well, but clearly there would always be exceptions to that.
- Working conditions and accommodation were seen to vary significantly from farm to farm, and as such, attention needs to be given to quality and consistency in these areas by both the employees and employers. A better understanding is required by some farmers of how to provide a more satisfying working environment and relationship, as is the importance of a clear understanding of the working conditions before commencing employment.

Farm employers who are prepared to manage these issues on their own properties will not only help themselves to attract better staff but also help to change the perceptions of people towards the dairy industry as a career.

Why should you be a good employer?

As an industry, it is vital that if we are to promote the industry we need to ensure the industry is capable of delivering upon the image we project. ATR Solutions recognise this as being critical to achieving any improvement in supplying labour to the industry and are very careful to focus on ensuring that people understand the realities of the industry before they make any decision to join it.

However, while many people will correctly identify that some employment practices on some farms are inappropriate, what many choose to ignore is that in most cases farm employers are doing their best, based on their circumstances and their understanding of the issues and the solutions available. There will always be those employers who warrant the proverbial “boot up the arse” and the industry will continue to be judged on their exploits. However in ATR Solutions’ opinion the labour market must manage these people because the industry does not currently appear willing to do more than provide opportunities for them to change.

In our experience we have found that the most satisfaction is derived from working with employers who want to be good employers, and leave the other employers to take their chances. Hence we predominantly work with people who recognise the value of “getting it right”, and are therefore prepared to put some effort into improving in areas where an improvement is required

In our experience most good employers have a mixture of two essential elements:

1. they believe that in order to attract and retain better quality employees within their business and industry, they must look after people properly
2. they derive personal and professional satisfaction from doing right by others, and providing people with opportunities to develop both professionally and personally.

How do you know if you are a good employer?

After seven years of asking this question of myself and others in the agricultural industry, I can confidently say the answer is, “It depends upon how serious you are to know the real answer”.

This could be discussed and decided over a few quiet moments at your local; by yourself or with your mates.

For those looking for a more formal method I would recommend one of the following:

- Quality Farm Employers of New Zealand (QFENZ) (www.qfenz.co.nz)
- Employment Health Assessment (www.eha.co.nz)

What is QFENZ?

QFENZ® is a wholly owned subsidiary of ATR Solutions Ltd. It is a commercial company that to date has received no industry funding.

QFENZ® is an organisation whose members are committed to providing a quality workplace for their employees.

The QFENZ® standard has been developed to ensure employment practices are consistently among the best you will find anywhere in New Zealand. The reputation of QFENZ is built on the on-going achievement of these standards by its members and the commitment to “doing it right”.

QFENZ® members commit to an independent annual assessment of their workplace to ensure their practices continue to meet the standard. As a result, employees can have confidence in choosing to work for a QFENZ® member and the employer can be confident they are doing all they can to build farm and individual performance.

Notes:

The QFENZ® Standard can be applied to any farm employing people anywhere in New Zealand.

What is the Employment Health Assessment?

In 2001, approaches were made to a range of industry organisations to identify one willing to pick up and develop the QFENZ® concept on a national basis on behalf of all farmers. Although all the organisations approached (with the exception of Federated Farmers) thought it was a good idea, none were prepared to get in behind it.

Dairy InSight however were prepared to provide industry funds for ATR Solutions to investigate how such a concept might evolve and how the industry's concerns might be alleviated. Over the following two years, consultation and development was undertaken with industry and farmers. This involved firstly identifying a vision that industry was prepared to support and, secondly, developing a resource with farmers and industry that achieved this vision.

The outcome of this process is the Employment Health Assessment which is not an employment standard, but rather a self assessment resource that farmers can use to identify the areas to focus on. The delivery of this resource is supported by Dexcel, AGITO and Federated Farmers.

The resource consists of a series of questions to help farmers identify which of the 10 key factors affecting labour on farms were most relevant to them. It then assists them to develop a precise picture of the ways these issues affect their business. The resource also contains useful advice on each of these factors and points employers to other resources that will help them to enhance their performance in the relevant areas.

Maximum value is derived from this resource where it is used in a workshop environment with a group of employers, as this generates discussion and debate, and encourages farmers to learn from each other. In this situation, employers can decide for themselves how they perform relative to their peers without the intrusion of a formal assessment.

According to QFENZ, what does good look like?

The very first QFENZ® Standard was recorded on a whiteboard during a shed meeting in 1999, where participants debated “what good looked like”.

The QFENZ® Standard has since evolved to the point where it is now made up of 12 indicators, each containing a number of requirements that must be met to achieve membership and be recognized as an “Employer of Choice”

The 12 indicators are:

1. *Compliance*: Meeting all legal requirements
2. *Planning*: Having a clear plan for the business that is understood by the right people
3. *Performance Management*: Effectively and fairly managing performance

1. *Training*: Identifying and providing appropriate opportunities to develop new skills
2. *Leadership*: Providing and supporting effective leadership on farm
3. *Communication*: Ensuring people know what to do, when and how
4. *Recruitment*: Taking the right steps to employ the right people
5. *Accommodation*: Providing a standard of housing that meets people's realistic needs
6. *Time off and Hours of Work*: Ensuring people receive what was agreed
7. *Remuneration Package*: Providing clarity of what is received and how it stacks up
8. *Health and Safety*: Ensuring Health and Safety is live on-farm not just boxes ticked
9. *Fair and Equitable Treatment*: People treated fairly and consistently.

The QFENZ[®] Standard is a registered trademark of QFENZ[®] Ltd and its purpose is to:

- enable the identification of “employers of choice”
- ensure members are providing a quality workplace for employees
- enable assessment of farm performance in a simple and credible manner that provides evidence that a standard is being achieved
- ensure employment practices are delivered in a manner that benefits both the employer and the employee(s).

How a QFENZ[®] assessment is delivered

Once a client requests an assessment, QFENZ[®] staff gather information about the farm, which includes employee remuneration and hours of work details as well as basic farm data. This enables an accurate picture of the structure of the business to be formed to plan the assessment, and also enables the *Hours and Remuneration Summary* to be completed, which provides a comprehensive look at these aspects of the clients business.

An assessor then arranges to come on-farm and talk to all the “people managers” within the business and at least 75% of the employees. This is known as a 360 degree look at the business which seeks verification from employees that the standard is being achieved.

Notes:

Once the assessment is completed, a full written report is provided to the client within 15 working days along with the membership result. There are three levels of membership:

1. *Provisional*: The employer displays the commitment to achieve the QFENZ® Full Membership Standard within an agreed period of time
2. *Full Member*: The employer meets all the QFENZ® Full Member requirements in every indicator
3. *Advanced Member*: The employer meets all the QFENZ® Full and Advanced Member requirements in every indicator. These employers have proven their ability to consistently meet, and in many cases exceed, the group's core principles.

Maintaining membership requires an annual re-assessment on-farm to ensure ongoing achievement against the QFENZ® standard.

Benefits of being a “good employer”

“The combined cost of voluntary staff turnover from exit and recruitment costs, induction, training and productivity losses was 93% of the Salary for a professional farm service firm manager.”

1998 Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources- Abbott, DeCiere and Iverson

“We have found that farms achieving the QFENZ Standards also rank highly in business performance”.

2006-Colin Glass- General Manager Dairy Holdings Ltd

To measure the benefits of being a good employer, you must first define what “good” looks like and then collect hard data. Currently QFENZ® is accumulating data to enable us to deliver hard and credible information. We are unaware of any other work within the agricultural sector that is focusing on identifying these benefits.

QFENZ® must deliver tangible benefits to clients in order to receive their business.

Depending on the level of membership attained, the following benefits are provided to members:

- Access to a defined standard for employment practices on-farm
- A professional report targeted to your business, identifying actions to improve the workplace
- Recognition as an “Employer of Choice”
- Membership to the Employers and Manufacturers Association (EMA) Northern
- Access to the annual QFENZ® Hours and Remuneration Summary
- QFENZ® Signage for the farm
- QFENZ® logo for advertising

- Member profiles on the QFENZ[®] website

Conclusion

There are a variety of opportunities for farmers to assess their performance as an employer and measure the quality of the working conditions they provide. There also exists a wealth of knowledge and support available to implement “good” employment practices on-farm.

There is however no guarantee when dealing with people, and the ability to identify, accept and manage change is as important in people management as it is with feed management.

The key difference appears to be the amount of time employers and employees are able, and then willing, to invest in this important facet of their business.

The most important step farmers and industry can take is to make “people matters” a subject of regular conversation and discussion, both on-farm and within the industry. In this manner we will ensure that progress is made.

The scale of that progress can be significant, or incremental, depending upon the effort put in, but ultimately will be the key to all efforts to improve the quality and quantity of people available to our industry in the future.

Notes: