

real-life  
farm management  
stories

# AgriSuccess



Ravi Cheema of Abbotsford tackles labour issues with fresh ideas



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SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 2010

### On the cover:

Ravi Cheema does a quality check in his Abbotsford, B.C. greenhouse.

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## from the editor



Let's call the theme for this edition People Power. We could also call it Human Resource Management, but that sounds a bit stuffy and boring, and that isn't our style.

We devoted a previous edition to farming with family, so this edition will deal with non-family employees.

Many of you run operations that use very few outside employees or perhaps none at all. We think you'll still find the stories interesting and relevant.

While labour is an issue for most Canadian business sectors, primary agriculture faces some unique challenges. One of them is perception, particularly if you try to hire workers with non-farm backgrounds.

Fast food restaurants provide common starter jobs for many young people. It isn't glamorous work, but it's familiar and nearby. The pay scale, benefits and work hours are clearly described. There's a definite plan for on-the-job training and the chain of workplace command is usually well defined.

By contrast, most urban young people know very little about agriculture, making a job on the farm a tough sell. Job training may not be well-orchestrated, and

with a family farm, it may be tough to know who you're supposed to take orders from.

So teens are faced with a difficult choice: work with friends flipping burgers at McDonald's, or take a chance on a farm job out in the country doing goodness knows what. Some farm jobs require unskilled labour and there's little upward mobility. In many other cases, there's work that's interesting and rewarding with opportunities to learn and advance.

But it's hard to communicate the positive messages. This is all part of the larger problem of talking about agriculture to an urban audience.

We need to walk a mile in the shoes of our employees and potential employees. We need to see things from their point of view if we want to be successful as an employer. The stories in this edition will hopefully provide some insights to help you out.

We appreciate your feedback, and email is the best way to reach us. I'm at [kevin@hursh.ca](mailto:kevin@hursh.ca).

## Consider the advantages of outside employees

Producers may not see it as a conscious strategy, but one of the most common approaches to farm labour issues is avoidance.

In many sectors of agriculture, there's no way to avoid having employees. A commercial greenhouse needs workers. So does a horticultural operation. So do most hog operations and cattle feedlots. There may be ways to move to fewer and more skilled workers, but some employees are still needed nonetheless.

On the other hand, many grain and cow-calf operations almost exclusively use family labour, and they want to keep it that way. Since most producers have no formal training in human resource management, operations that rely on family labour may worry about how an outside worker will fit in and how long training will take. Maybe there just doesn't seem to be the cash flow or profitability to pay for outside labour. Or maybe an employee is needed for only part of the year and it seems impossible to find someone suitable and reliable for that short time span.

There are many ways to avoid hiring non-family labour, but keep in mind that these methods all come with their own costs and issues.

There can be too much reliance on a family member. A son or daughter may be too young or too inexperienced for a particular task. Or the work may involve more hours than what is reasonable given their school commitments.

Dad or Grandpa might be getting too old to work long hours in peak seasons. And there may be resistance to learning about the latest electronic technology.

There may be a new addition to the family who will need time and attention. Illness and disability can also take a toll.

Hiring an outside worker has to be weighed against all these family considerations.

Many farms hire custom contractors rather than employees. A family dairy operation may contract some or all of its haying and silage operations. This can have advantages, but it can also be more expensive and you have less control over when the job is done.

### One of the most common approaches to farm labour issues is avoidance.


Another common coping technique is bigger, more modern equipment. Many grain producers move from two combines to one outfit that's newer and bigger, so one less operator is required.

Is this a logical business decision supported by a financial analysis, or is it an avoidance of outside labour based mainly on emotion?

The crops you grow, decisions about expansion, even succession planning all involve elements of the labour issue.

It isn't easy to find, train and retain the right employee(s), but if you completely rule it out in your planning process, you'll be limiting your options.

BY KEVIN HURSH / *Kevin is a consulting agrologist and journalist based in Saskatoon, Sask. He also operates a grain farm near Cabri, Sask., growing a wide array of crops.*



Thank you!

## A heartfelt thank you goes a long way

Mark Twain once said, “I can live two months off a good compliment.” Giving an employee a heartfelt thank you for a job well done is an effective, inexpensive way to cultivate a happy, highly motivated workforce.

“There are a lot of people in the workforce who feel they get very little reward and recognition,” says Montreal-based human resource consultant, Louis Fortin. “When you mess up, the boss normally lets you know about it right away so when you do something good, you like to hear kudos.”

Fortin says when the U.S. Personnel Management Association asked workers why they quit their jobs, 85 per cent said they left because they were unhappy with the supervisor or manager they were working under. Only 15 per cent left because of their pay, benefits, working conditions or other reasons.

If you want to keep your employees around, remember that money isn’t everything. People prefer an employer who offers encouragement and invests in them by offering training, to one who only offers slightly higher base pay. Little gestures or tokens for a job well done are appreciated and remembered.

“When an employee does something that goes above and beyond what’s expected of them, recognize it somehow,” Fortin explains. “Say here’s a pair of

hockey tickets to see the game on Saturday night. Or here is a gift certificate for a restaurant. Take your spouse out for a nice dinner.”

According to Fortin, these types of incentives work best when they’re used to provide instant recognition for a job well done. Give them out within a week or two of the achievement that you’re recognizing.

While small tokens of appreciation for a job well done are surprisingly good motivators, a performance bonus at the end of the year could fall short. These types of incentives are usually calculated based mainly on the performance of the company. If an employee had a good year but the company had a bad year, the bonus could be disappointing.

“Usually, the main advantage of performance incentives is to make workers more conscious of how the company is doing overall,” Fortin explains. “They help workers keep the big picture in mind when they go about their day.”

The important thing is to make progress in showing appreciation to those around you. It’s bound to pay off.

**BY LORNE McCLINTON** / *Lorne has worked in the communications field for the last 20 years as a journalist, photographer, scriptwriter and corporate writer. He divides his time between Quebec and his grain farm in Saskatchewan.*

## Company vehicles may be taxable

Many producers let employees use a company truck for work but not all are aware that it could be a taxable benefit that may have to be declared at tax time. It all hinges on whether it's also available for personal use.

“If the employee doesn't drive it home but leaves it at the farm, then there is no taxable benefit,” says Murray Rossworn, a chartered accountant with Rossworn Henderson LLP in Enderby, B.C. “There was a recent court decision where the employee was allowed to take the vehicle home at night because it would have been vandalized if it would have remained parked overnight at the work premises, so there is that angle too.”

Employees can deduct a portion of truck expenses or their personal cell phone bill against their wages if they're required to use them for farm-related work. All that's needed to claim these back on their personal income tax form is to have the employer fill out a conditions of employment form (T2200). **LM**



## Employees enjoy tax-free benefits

There is a wide range of tax-free benefits that producers can use to sweeten their employees' compensation packages, says Murray Rossworn, chartered accountant with Rossworn Henderson LLP in Enderby, B.C. But he warns that taking advantage of them involves wading through complex Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) regulations.

“An employer can give a \$500 non-cash gift and a \$500 non-cash award to an employee every year, for a total of \$1,000,” Rossworn says. “These are deductible expenses for the employer but the employee doesn't have to pay tax on them. It's important that they aren't cash. You could buy them an airline ticket but you can't give them cash to buy their own. Jewelry and gift certificates aren't acceptable because they can be converted into cash.”

Private health services plans could put extra dollars in your employee's pocket while still being a deductible

expense for you. Subsidizing the interest rate on an employee's mortgage or vehicle loan down to the CRA's prescribed rate (one per cent at the time of writing) is another way of getting cash to your employees without them having to pay taxes on it.

“Northern farms can take advantage of the northern residence deduction. If you have a farm in the Okanagan and a ranch in the Chilcotin (of B.C.) and you have an employee go to work in the Chilcotin for the summer, they would be eligible for a remote worksite allowance. You can also pay long-term employees a retiring allowance. There are all kinds of things you can do.”

“The whole area of benefits gets very complicated,” Rossworn says, “and you must stay onside with CRA rules.” Contact a local professional before you make any decisions. **LM**



CHEEMA & SON  
FARMS

bergine  
BROWN

## Ravi Cheema finds solutions to labour issues



Berries and cole crops such as broccoli represent the bulk of income for Cheema & Sons Farms in Abbotsford, B.C. But for 32-year-old Ravi Cheema, the future of the family farm lies in greenhouse vegetables.

Ravi's father, Darshan, began the farm in 1977, the year Ravi was born, starting with a few acres of strawberries, which gradually expanded to 70 acres.

"We got out of strawberries because of price and labour," Cheema states. "We couldn't get the labour we needed and couldn't compete on price with our southern friends."

They switched to blueberries, becoming one of the first growers in Abbotsford, and now have close to 45 acres. A lucrative crop for over a decade, blueberries have recently fallen on hard times. While lower blueberry prices have affected his pocketbook, Cheema believes the market collapse may filter out the non-farmers growing the crop simply as a sideline.

Unlike strawberries, which require dozens of pickers, blueberries are machine-harvested, dramatically reducing labour needs. Labour, however, is still a basic requirement in cole crops.

To harvest their broccoli, the Cheemas need up to 100 workers. "We rely on farm labour contractors to supply our harvest labour but it's increasingly hard to get. We may ask a contractor for 50 or 100 workers but he will often show up with only half that number."

While farm labour contractors may get criticism, Cheema believes some of it is unfair. Contractors rely on an aging Indo-Canadian workforce and the next generation is looking elsewhere for work.

Even those workers who remain in agriculture prefer not to work in the fields. It's one reason the Cheemas got into greenhouse production – they knew that's where workers wanted to be.

**Even those workers who remain in agriculture prefer not to work in the fields.**

To start, the Cheemas bought a small, aging greenhouse. Then in 2005, they built their own state-of-the-art 2.5-acre glass house. With a header room and boiler room large enough for about eight acres, they planned to expand within a couple of years, but held off because of economic conditions.



Now, those plans are back on the table. Cheema expects to have seven acres under glass next year, but hasn't confirmed what he'll grow.

Once the full greenhouse is in production, Cheema will need about 20 full-time workers for inside and outside work. He was relying on Mexican workers through the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) but has backed off in the last two years.

"The SAWP workers have to go back by Dec. 15, which is just when we are cleaning out the greenhouse," he notes.

In 2008, he went to India and brought back a few workers through the Low-Skilled Worker Program (LSWP), which allows workers to remain in Canada two full years.

"I can speak Punjabi so it's easier for me to communicate with the Indian workers," he notes.

This year, he hopes to add workers from the Philippines, again through the LSWP.

When not working on his farm, Cheema is involved in industry issues. He's vice-president of the B.C. Greenhouse Growers Association, vice-president of the B.C. Cole Crops Association, a director of B.C. Hothouse and the first president of B.C. Young Farmers.

"You can't just sit on a tractor anymore. You need to get out there and protect your interests and to do that you need to be on boards," he notes, adding he's really benefited from the new B.C. Young Farmers organization.

"It makes me feel good that there's something happening to keep farmers going. Learning from each other's problems has also been good."

BY **DAVID SCHMIDT** / *David is associate editor of Country Life in B.C. and contributes to various regional and national agricultural publications. He grew up on a mixed/dairy farm in the Fraser Valley. He was named B.C.'s Agriculturist of the Year for 2000.*

**PHOTOS (PREVIOUS PAGES):**

1 - CHEEMA & SONS FARM EMPLOYEES PACKING VEGETABLES

2 - L TO R: RAVI AND DARSHAN CHEEMA



# Deal with conflict

## on your farm

Human resource specialist Pierre Battah offers tips for a better work environment.

### How can agriculture producers set up a respectful workplace environment for their staff?

The first thought is to give a clear understanding of what expectations are, so people know what their job is – and more importantly, what their job isn't. That eliminates stepping on each other's toes and all kinds of conflict that stems from lack of clarity of where one job ends and another begins.

The second one is clear expectation by the boss about the importance of respect in the workplace and establishing zero tolerance for people not respecting that.

The third element is the role of the boss to model the way and be held almost to a higher order in terms of how they treat people. If I'm the boss, I have to show respect and I have to act on disrespect when it rears its ugly head.

### What's the best way to deal with conflict in the workplace?

The first premise is to take it seriously. Whether you observe something that doesn't sit right with how people are with one another or whether you're told about conflict, pay attention when it comes to you.

The second piece is you have to get the facts. But what gets in the way of getting the facts is really all of the emotion – people are upset or they're mad. The most

challenging part of this for a boss is to separate the fact from the emotion of the situation. That becomes critical. The way you do that is speak to the people involved, calmly with lots of questions and as neutral as you can be, with the objective to find out what's really going on.

The third piece is taking action. Maybe you're not going to do anything. It may be you're going to opt to have the two people involved sit down together with you and try to sort this out. Maybe it's flagrant and you need to take action that's disciplinary. Or it can be getting some advice. All of that's in play in terms of getting a perspective on how to manage this.

### What types of resources are available?

Chambers of commerce or boards of trade have templates for employee handbooks, or provincial departments of labour have employment standards. Or you can search "respectful workplace policy" online.

Also, there are talented people who can help when you're at an impasse. If you have key people in a conflict situation, there are trained conflict resolution professionals who do mediation.

**PIERRE BATTAH, BBA, MBA, CHRP AND CMC**, specializes in human resource management consulting. Based in Moncton, he's a partner in Evolution Consulting Group and an award-winning instructor in human resource management areas.



# FCC Drive Away Hunger

Join the drive. This year, FCC offices across Canada are working with their communities and food banks to drive away hunger. Bring your food or cash donation to the FCC office nearest you between September 20 and October 15.

Want to do more to help fill empty plates in your community?

Call 1-800-387-3232 or visit [www.fccdriawayhunger.ca](http://www.fccdriawayhunger.ca).



# Human or Machine?

Robots are coming. They're already hard at work milking cows at dairies across Canada. And one expert believes robots will become as common as tractors on farms in the near future.



Tony Stentz, associate director of the National Robotics Engineering Center at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh says farmers could be using autonomous machines for everything from growing field crops to harvesting fruits and vegetables within the next 10 years. Visit [www.fcc.ca/agrisuccess](http://www.fcc.ca/agrisuccess) for a link to watch a milking robot at work.

Robots and autonomous machines may seem like science fiction but in many ways, they're the next step in a very old process. Increasing mechanization to improve efficiency has been a constant in agriculture for more than a century.

"Field crops like corn, soybeans and wheat already use a fair amount of automation," Stentz says. "In

fact, you could look at a machine like a combine and say it's 95 per cent automated. It does reaping and threshing, all automatically. The last five per cent is the driver." That's why a single combine operator can now thresh more grain in an hour than a 30-man crew in the 1920s could in a day.

While field crop production is accomplished by increasingly sophisticated machines, the fruit, vegetable and horticulture sectors still largely rely on access to labour. Now that workers are becoming harder to find and much more expensive, interest in automation is increasing.

"An automated mobile machine can continually work at peak speeds without taking a break," Stentz



explains. “Safety is also an important factor. They can reduce operator exposure to chemicals and keeping people off of machines generally improves safety.”

### **Now that workers are becoming harder to find and much more expensive, interest in automation is increasing.**

When Peter and Sherry Van Berlo of Simcoe, Ont. started to experiment with growing sweet potatoes, they quickly realized that finding enough labour for harvest was going to be a big problem. Sweet potatoes are very delicate and bruise easily; they can’t be harvested using a machine designed for potatoes.

“Sweet potatoes are harvested by hand in North Carolina, Louisiana and Mississippi,” Peter says. “Producers there will have 500 experienced workers show up in the morning. We just can’t get that kind of labour here. It didn’t take me long to figure out that if we were going to grow sweet potatoes in a big way, we had to mechanize.”

Peter and his son put their heads together to design and build a digger that would work with the crop. It took a few tries but eventually, they came up with a machine that worked perfectly. Each digger can harvest as many sweet potatoes a day as 200 people could by hand. It cut their harvest labour requirements by 90 per cent.

“Our diggers are gentler with the sweet potatoes than harvesting them by hand,” Sherry adds. “It works so well that we’re starting to get producers come up here from North Carolina to see them in operation.”

California citrus growers have become so concerned about future potential labour shortages that they contracted Vision Robotics, a small San Diego-based company, to design a machine that could pick oranges.

They came up with a two-robot design. The first has a series of cameras on movable arms. It goes down a row of trees scanning and three-dimensionally plotting where the fruit is located. The second, octopus-like robot takes the co-ordinates from the first robot and picks the fruit in the most efficient way possible.

“The industry said if you have a machine that scans and locates the fruit, that means you know the exact count of fruit,” says Vision Robotics CEO Derek Morikawa. “We said we know the exact count and can give an accurate sizing of



all the fruit as well. They said an accurate inventory, tree by tree, row by row, and block by block, is probably even more valuable. As a result, we're focusing first on the scouting robots for the tree fruit industry and will follow that with the harvesting robot. We'll have some out working in California citrus groves and Washington apple orchards this summer."

Back in Pittsburgh, Tony Stentz agrees there is a huge demand for a machine that can pick oranges, apples and vegetables because these tasks are so labour intensive. Unfortunately it's a real challenge to build a cost-effective system that can do it without damaging the plants. He says cameras, sensors and other electronic components are continually improving and becoming cheaper while labour costs continue to rise. It should be possible to build an affordable one within 10 years, but for now, his group is focusing on automating tractors.

"Once you automate a tractor, you can quickly use it to do many operations on the farm autonomously," Stentz explains. "Farming is really all about going over the same land over and over again. Spraying is all about implementing a coverage pattern to get the job done and that's not all that difficult to do with

technologies like GPS. The challenging part is outfitting it with sensors that will allow it to detect and stop for any person, piece of machinery or other dynamic hazard it finds in its path."

Robotic tractors will also revolutionize field crop production, says Ron Palmer, head of the electronic engineering faculty at the University of Regina. He foresees farmers maximizing their efficiency and reducing their costs and risk by switching from a few large pieces of farm machinery to fleets of small ones working autonomously.

The first agricultural robot Vision Robotics expects to fully commercialize is a vine-pruning robot for grape growers. They expect to have prototypes available for producers to try this year. If all goes as planned, customers will be able to buy them the following year. Watch these robots in action at [www.visionrobotics.com](http://www.visionrobotics.com).

BY LORNE MCCLINTON

PHOTOS (COURTESY VISION ROBOTICS CORPORATION)

1 - ROBOTIC PRUNER

2,3 - ROBOTIC HARVESTERS

# Hiring steps are simple

## but often ignored

Hiring new staff on a farm is a regular occurrence, whether you need seasonal help or a new farm manager. The hiring process is the crucial first step to ensure that daily farm operations run smoothly.

It's more than just a 20-minute interview. Your work begins the instant you decide to hire someone.

The first step is to take time to do some research. There are plenty of resources online to help you not only post the job locally and beyond, but get step-by-step instructions on how to hire, what questions to ask in the interview and what to do after the employee has been hired.

Organizations such as the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council (CAHRC) are continually working to develop better guides and resources. CAHRC has also produced reports and statistics about hiring and human resource practices through surveys and interviews with producers. (Visit [www.cahrc-ccrha.ca](http://www.cahrc-ccrha.ca) for more information.)

“One recommendation that came out loud and clear from producers to facilitate hiring and recruiting was to develop a human resources toolkit to condense some practices and some tips on how to be effective in HR management practices,” says Danielle Vinette, CAHRC executive director, “and so now we're working towards that.”

Often, producers underestimate the influence of human resources management and won't consider it enough when hiring.

“It's considered valuable but it's not necessarily an investment that producers will take the time to make,” Vinette says. “If you're hiring two or three people for your operation, you don't have the capacity to have an HR manager. But you don't

necessarily have the skill set either to manage those people.”

Because producers often don't have experience in this area, it makes research on hiring procedures even more important.

### The hiring process is the crucial first step to ensure that daily farm operations run smoothly.

The next, and one of the most crucial steps, is to develop a job description, which is your opportunity to set goals for the business and your expectations for the employee. Even if the job description isn't going to be posted in a newspaper or online, it's a good reference point for you and the employee. And it's valuable for doing a work evaluation later on.

“It's not necessarily a laundry list of absolutely every duty, but definitely a piece of paper that you can go back to and say you've done a really good job, or here are some areas that you still need training or help or we need to talk about,” says Elaine Graham, senior partner and recruitment specialist at Besterd Agricultural Placements in Guelph, Ont.

Once you have a list of qualified candidates to interview, compare resumés and make a chart listing the qualifications you'd like to see, checking off which qualifications candidates mention in their resumés. If you don't see a qualification that you'd like, make note to ask about it in the interview.

Before you assess the candidates in the interview, it's essential to evaluate yourself. What kind of manager are you? What sort of person do you get along with best? What are your weaknesses so that you can look for those as strengths in your candidate?

“Everybody has a different management style,” Graham says. “Everybody has different day-to-day operational styles. Some people are very informal and some are looking for an employee that needs to keep busy without being asked.”

Be honest when you assess yourself. If you get easily exasperated when problems arise, look to hire someone who knows how to deal with your temperament in a way that won't frustrate you further.

“Farmers are really seasonally stressed. It can be go-go-go. They're very task-oriented and they may forget the other pieces that may make things go smoothly,” Graham explains.

sure the candidate knows the proper protocol for on-farm food safety or keeping IP beans segregated.

“Do more than a cursory interview,” Graham says. “It may seem like a waste of time spending a half a day with someone talking with them or walking them around your property. Do it.”

Once you decide who you're going to hire, prepare your new employee properly. For example, some farms pay employees to read an orientation and operating manual.

“If there are processes or protocols, or if they have special marketing, farm safety or food safety rules on the farm, the employee needs to be familiar with them,” Graham adds.



There's a growing trend in hiring to have lengthy interviews with prospective employees. Not only should you be asking them questions, but you should be showing them around the farm and getting to know them better.

“Yes of course, you want somebody with skills and qualifications, but when you hire, you're looking for a fit,” Graham adds.

Two people may be equally qualified on paper, but one may be more enthusiastic about working with animals or may be assertive in moving on to the next task. Some are self-starters, while others may not be.

The interview doesn't need to be a whole series of questions either. In other employment fields, there are proficiency tests, such as for software as an architect's assistant, or customer service skills for a front-desk position. On a farm, the proficiency test will depend on the position, but it could be making

It's becoming more difficult for producers to find qualified employees. But hiring is not a process that should be rushed. Your new employee should work well within the dynamics of the farm. Don't let expediency be the shortfall of efficiency.

Whether it's a staff of five or 50, the hiring process is pivotal in how productively your business runs once everyone gets down to work.

Visit [www.fcc.ca/workshops](http://www.fcc.ca/workshops) for a Hiring and Keeping Employees workshop near you.

**BY HUGH MAYNARD AND CHRISTINA FRANC** / *Hugh is a specialist in agricultural communications based in Ormstown, Que. A graduate in farm management from Macdonald College (McGill University), Hugh is a seasoned journalist and broadcaster. Christina is a communications co-ordinator for Qu'anglo Communications and Consulting. She is also studying journalism at Carleton University.*





FEATURE

# Focus on culture, not just agriculture, to recruit and retain workers

Most *AgriSuccess* readers have likely explained to someone that farming is a lifestyle, not just a job. Often, that statement is followed by a list of attractive, yet honest amenities associated with farming, such as fresh air, exercise, independence and (sometimes) flexibility.

But have you ever talked about those same environmental and cultural virtues with budding employees? Those to whom you're trying to offer a job?

Think about it. When you consider a prospective employee, you're naturally focused on the work they'll be doing for you. After all, you have a profitable business, and engaged employees help keep it that way.

However, to a new hire, farming's lifestyle could be as appealing as the work itself. And knowing that will

greatly influence the way you go about recruiting and retaining them.

Erika Osmundson, marketing and communications manager for the employment resource company AgCareers.com, suggests farmers consider highlighting the culture side of agriculture in their recruitment strategies. Farming's positive lifestyle elements could be very alluring to potential hard-working employees who want a change from urban living.

"Money is important when recruiting, but to prospective employees, it's not all about the salary," she says.

There's no question though that since the recession, money, along with stability, is bringing out new workers. A shift has occurred in recruitment, as more applicants with non-traditional backgrounds apply

for farm jobs. They're not neighbouring farm kids drawn to a position to get some experience while they wait out their parents' retirement and take over the farm. Rather, they're skilled or semi-skilled workers left jobless by the manufacturing sector collapse, seeking new beginnings in the relative stability of the agri-food sector.

## To a new hire, farming's lifestyle could be as appealing as the work itself.

And they come with a new set of talents that are important for farming. Among these are computer skills, which speak for themselves, given the increasing computer use in farm management. Statistics Canada says Internet use is now at 80 per cent across the country, which has implications before and after hiring. Osmundson says a whopping 89 per cent of job seekers look online, using electronic job boards, checking in with Internet-based employment companies such as hers, and answering ads appearing in the web-based editions of weekly newspapers.

To her, that means modern employers should likewise consider electronic communication as a tool to find their next hire.

Another emerging approach to recruitment is location. With increasing urbanization, farms that were once in the proverbial middle of nowhere are now practically in someone's backyard. This gives you another opportunity to capitalize on the new workforce's urbanized perspective – commuters living in the suburbs think nothing of a one-hour daily drive to jobs in the city. So, says Osmundson, turn that around, and promote the ease of driving against the traffic, arriving to fresh air and wide open spaces, rather than smog and congestion. "It's another way farming's natural cultural advantages can work in your favour," she says.

But once you've attracted employees, the next part of your job is finding ways to keep them. Turnover is crippling and inevitable if you don't offer employees opportunities for achievement, stimulation and recognition, by far the biggest retention factors.

Osmundson says some of the best approaches are affordable and accessible. For example, if you're a livestock producer and your employees have families,

how about offering them a side of beef or pork for a job well done? Or how about an extended vacation? Travel is also a popular incentive for the new pool of prospective farm employees, because it helps promote a healthy work-life balance, which they hold dear.

Wellness programs, such as gym memberships, are likewise coveted, and bring additional advantages to employers. Workers who are physically fit are generally more upbeat, aware and attuned to their job. They're able to perform strength-related on-farm tasks, and they're less likely to experience muscle-related injuries requiring time off to heal. The same goes for offering education incentives, such as paying for employees to take courses. A sharp mind complements a well-tuned body.

However, Osmundson cautions that recognition or perks should not be meted out routinely or arbitrarily. Your expectations should be made clear to employees, so they have a goal, and you have a yardstick to measure their success.

**BY OWEN ROBERTS** / *Owen, a native of Mitchell's Bay, Ont., teaches agricultural communications at the Ontario Agricultural College, University of Guelph and is director of research communications for the university. He is also a freelance journalist and broadcaster.*



# Labour mobility

## is a moving force in farming

Workers of the world are on the move, from oil riggers to trans-ocean shippers. As “immobile” as a Canadian farm might seem, agriculture will be increasingly linked to the human resources other regions have to offer.

Any farm that relies on seasonal labour to pick fruits and vegetables, or takes on extra hands during the busy harvest season, experiences the difficulty of securing a capable and reliable source of workers.

The Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council estimates that 50,000 workers will be needed in the agriculture sector in the next five years, just as an aging and retiring workforce becomes a dominant demographic trend. In this context, the time has come for Canadian agriculture to look beyond guest programs for workers from other countries.

There’s nothing new in this situation. Canadian agriculture was built on gangs of itinerant labourers moving from farm to farm to help with chores, harvest and construction. The stairs from the attic bedroom into the summer kitchen in my old farm house, worn smooth by legions of hob-nailed boots, are testament to that heritage.

The context of itinerant labour is different now: skilled is the word.

Greenhouse operators bring in skilled workers from Europe to hang vines and do other tasks that require expertise not to be found locally. Experienced

combine operators, especially those who come with their own piece of machinery, can rotate through the harvesting seasons of North American regions, exploiting the climate differentials to string together months of work in a row. Few are the farms that don’t hire some form of custom work, from manure spreading to bagging silage.

What about the longer term? Guest foreign workers fill some of the seasonal gap, but these programs do little to address the development of available labour for the agriculture sector.

In Quebec, several rural regions offer worker settlement programs complete with housing, schooling, job placement and language training services to attract new immigrant families. There are also calls for immigration rules to be changed so that guest agricultural workers can transform their accumulated periods of temporary employment into landed immigrant status – and become full-time workers in the agriculture sector.

Farming faces the double challenge of competing with other industries that pay higher wages, and asking people to travel outside of cities. Taking advantage of mobile labour resources is a strategy worth considering until agriculture can attract skilled workers who will set down roots in the countryside.

BY HUGH MAYNARD



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# Watch out

## for your farm workers

Since most farms are family owned, loved ones and close friends are often the victims of farm mishaps. But thousands of others who work on farms face the same dangers – and producers across the country have both a moral and legal responsibility to keep them safe.

Back in May, a 34-year-old seasonal worker from Mexico suffered life-threatening injuries, including the loss of a leg, when the tractor he was driving was hit from behind by a car in Ontario's Niagara region.

The accident occurred just days before an expert panel of the Ontario Ministry of Labour, which has had jurisdiction over farms since 2006, started public consultations on how to reduce workplace deaths and injuries in the province.

In their presentation to the panel, unions representing farm workers used the accident to call for tougher standards on farms, including mandatory training for the operation of heavy equipment like tractors. "Farm work is some of the most dangerous work there is," said Wayne Hanley, national president of United Food and Commercial Workers Canada. "Agriculture workers in Ontario absolutely need better protection than they get now."

While no two provinces have the same rules and standards, many have programs and services aimed at improving the security of farm workers – and farmers are responding favourably.

In British Columbia, for example, the Inter-Agency Agriculture Compliance Committee was created in 2007 after a van carrying 16 farm workers crashed,

killing three and injuring the rest. The committee has spearheaded education, prevention and enforcement efforts aimed at improving the safety of farm vehicles – everything from tractors and wagons to trucks and cars.

Similarly, in Ontario, which has the same number of farms as Saskatchewan but three times as many farm workers, inspectors from the provincial labour ministry now go to farms and write orders to correct dangerous situations or suggest production techniques that can reduce injuries.

According to the Farm Safety Association, which promotes safe and healthy workplaces for the agricultural, horticultural and landscaping industries in Ontario, those visits help producers identify and rectify hazards.

When it comes to negligence, the legal onus is squarely on the property owner. "Farmers are no different than anybody else," says Ward Henderson, head of national loss control services for Co-operators Insurance, which insures 47,000 Canadian farms.

"If you've got a lagoon or a pit on your property that a kid or a snowmobiler could fall into – even a bad set of stairs that people can fall down – you need to take precautions. You have to make your premises safe."

**BY MARK CARDWELL** / *Mark is a writer and freelance journalist who lives in the Quebec City region. He is a regular correspondent for a dozen newspapers, magazines, trade and specialty publications in Canada, the United States and Europe.*



FROM FCC

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