

Retaining your workforce - keep your grass green

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Ten years ago this article would have focused on how to pick the best applicant for your farm business. We would have discussed the importance of creating advertising to attract the right people, and of interviewing together with reference checking to make the best decision.

Although these factors are still important parts of the people management mix, it's vital to understand that as times change our people management processes must change too. Three key factors are now affecting the way we approach people management.

Firstly, Australia is experiencing record low unemployment rates, currently just over 4.3%. The unemployment rate of those aged between 15 and 19 years (those looking to enter the workforce) is as low as 4.0%.

Secondly, the workforce is not getting any younger, and we will soon have more people leaving work than entering it. Currently, Australia has four workers to one retiree; in 30 years time Australia will have two workers to every three retirees.

The Generation Y Factor

Thirdly, the influx of Generation Y into the workforce is adding a different flavour to the work place mix, offering a new wave of enthusiasm, adaptability, efficiency, technological mindedness, tolerance to diversity and drive to succeed. Sounds good doesn't it?

Market researcher Penny Burke (2007) found that the essence of attracting and retaining those in the 'Gen Y' category comes down to the individual's attitude and perceptions of the work and the workplace. Burke breaks these down into three categories:

1. Those who want to make a positive difference, from an altruistically-driven perspective, towards the world, environment, society, community or humanity.
2. Those who want to make money, where work is the means to an end, but definitely not the end in itself.
3. Those who don't really want to work because it makes no difference (they are either disenfranchised with the purpose of work, or have no passion to be focused on working and defined by a job).

Burke's research further indicates that Gen Y very rarely stays in one work place beyond a year, with most believing that working for one year is enough to demonstrate loyalty to an employer. My favourite comment was: "To be honest, working for over one year in the same job sounds horrendous".

It was also mentioned that Gen Y starts looking for a new position as quick as two hours after starting a job. Two hours! And why not, they know they have the power to choose and negotiate on their terms.

But this couldn't happen within farming could it? Sure, there are skill shortages, not too many young people around, but this Gen Y stuff seems a bit too far! This research must be focused and only relate to people living and working within the city. You would never see this happen in the country! Right?

Have you heard about the resource boom? People tell me at least once a week about people leaving the industry to earn the big bucks in mining. And it's not just Generation Y. Agriculture is not immune.

The challenge to all employers is that once you have the right person, you need to hold onto them. Never is the saying that the 'grass is greener on the other side of the fence' more relevant.

So what can be done about this?

Retaining staff

MS&A believes that it is important for all employers to place their focus and efforts on retaining staff. So, if you have good staff there are a few things you can do to keep them working happily within your business.

The Career: People want to understand where they are heading, or if they are heading anywhere. Personal and professional development and training opportunities, taking on more responsibility and progressing in the business are all important factors that can impact on job satisfaction.

The Challenge: People want to be challenged. Set some goals, make them specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and set a timeline for completion. This has the potential to not only increase satisfaction levels, but increase efficiency and overall productivity.



The Conditions: People need to be paid fairly for what they do. The provision of good housing and other benefits need to be clearly agreed upon, and upheld. Also consider how you can bring flexibility into the work place. Give people the flexibility to take time off to go to school activities, start or finish earlier, annual leave, time in lieu and overtime options. Promised that you would fix up the house? Do it. Discussed a salary increase but never got around to it? Do it. Employed someone to oversee an enterprise? Let them.

These things do not just help to retain Generation Y, but people across all generations.

As drought breaks, more employers are needing staff so more options are open to those seeking new positions. Now is the time to keep your grass green and hold on to the staff you have.

Burke, P (2007). *Forced Focus: Essence of attracting and retaining the best people.* Messenger Publishing.

<http://www.workplace.gov.au/lmip/LabourForceData?cid=UnemploymentByStateAndTerritory%7CLFRHome%7CNational%7CLFR%7Canon%7CLabour%20Market>