

Creating a Better Workplace

Many employers think that the main reason people stay in or leave a workplace is due to the wages and salary packages offered. While this may be true for some people, there are often more complicated factors surrounding a person's decisions to stay or move on.



In addition to a competitive salary, people value a challenging and rewarding workplace. Factors that can help create a positive working environment with a good work life balance include:

- when there is a clear avenue for [career development](#)
- if an employee feels valued and part of a team
- a [safe working environment](#)
- when employees feel supported in developing skills and knowledge through [training](#), and
- reasonable and fair [working hours](#) and conditions

Rather than focusing on one strategy to retain staff, it can be better to build a foundation by choosing a number of factors that will encourage people to stay.

Sometimes, a small gesture goes a long way to show employees that they are a valued member of the team. Some of these ways include:

- celebrate success - acknowledge significant milestones of the farm business or personal achievements (e.g. a barbecue or meal out)
- allow time off for people to attend family, school, or sporting events
- celebrate special days such as Christmas and Easter with a small gift or bonus
- praise a job well done, or
- offer social or team building opportunities.

Exit interviews

Conducting an exit interview might not be the most comfortable thing to do but it can help you understand why a person has chosen to leave your farm. The information gathered from exit interviews can provide a great opportunity for you to review strengths and weaknesses in your approach to people on the farm.

You may like to ask ex-employees to fill in a survey or questionnaire if you feel too uncomfortable conducting an exit interview.

When people leave your employment they may ask you to provide them with:

- a simple statement of employment service (the name of the employee, their job title or role they performed and the dates of employment), or
- a written or verbal reference (e.g. describing the person's skills, how they performed and what personal attributes they brought to the job)

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Communication strategies – where to start?

The first step in developing good communication strategies in any workplace is understanding what 'works'. A recent survey of people issues with farmers, consultants, HR specialists and researchers identified 4 underlying factors as the keys to success for working with people on farm. These factors are:

- consider all the people on the farm (not just employees)
- adapt the way things are done on the farm to suit people
- have the right people doing the right jobs at the right time
- establish and maintain effective working relationships

Effective questioning

Communication is critical to creating a strong team. People who feel free to express their thoughts and ideas in the workplace will feel more valued and 'part of the team'. Having open lines of communication also helps to build trust, provide opportunities for constructive feedback, and often means that health and safety issues are more likely to be discussed and addressed in a timely manner. This may all sound simple and straightforward but communication breakdowns are quite common in work environments.

There are many ways of exchanging information and viewpoints. This can happen through informal chats in a work shed, notes on the whiteboard, regular team meetings, or more formal meetings such as individual performance appraisals. You can choose to communicate in whichever way works best for you and your employees. However, there are a few key techniques that may improve the lines of communication on your farm.

Questioning people in a non-threatening way is a good way to encourage communication. There are two types of questions: open or closed.

Closed questions limit conversation because they can only be answered with a yes, no, or only a few words. In order to get conversation flowing, try using **open questions**. These are questions that begin with how, what, when, why, which or where. These invite people to express their thoughts and feelings. Open questioning is also a good technique to use during the [interview process](#)

Listening

There are always changes to planned activities, particularly in tough times such as droughts or floods. This means listening effectively and providing reassurance as the work is done and sometimes stepping in to help out if needed.

To achieve truly effective communication, you must make sure that you listen to the concerns or requests of your employees. To really listen, you must enter a conversation with the intent to understand, not simply to tick a box. Set aside a time when your employees can feel free to drop in for an informal chat or let them know the process if they want to request a more formal meeting.

Clearly expressing your thoughts and ideas

Presenting your ideas clearly helps others understand your messages. Think about what you want to say and state the key points. Don't make assumptions about what people know. Explain the 'why' behind the 'what'. If people understand why a task is being done then they are more likely to feel included in the running of the farm and committed to their work.

Giving clear verbal directions also makes it more likely that the job will be done properly. Written [operating procedures](#) are useful for clarifying instructions.

Put your message in writing

There are lots of times when providing a short written message to employees can be the best way to communicate detailed instructions or directions. You can leave notes, email information, or use message boards or whiteboards, which everyone checks when they arrive at work. Make sure that all staff know they are expected to check message boards on a daily or weekly basis. You can also give someone the responsibility of keeping the information on the board up to date and for transferring the important information to a permanent location such as a computer.

Nowadays, text messaging has become a common form of communication. It is an effective way of relaying messages accurately, time efficiently and with minimal use of technology. But remember that text messaging should not be used for disciplinary messages.

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Reward and recognition

A good way to show your employees that you appreciate their contribution to the farm business is through reward and recognition. Everyone likes to have good work recognised and this can go a long way towards retaining good employees.

Rewards and recognition don't always have to have a monetary value attached to them – there are many ways of showing appreciation. Try to match rewards to an employee's personal situation and goals by understanding the reward that will motivate them the most.

Wage or salary increase

Financial reward is a common way of recognising a job well done. This is usually seen in the form of a wage or salary increase but not always. Wage and salary rises can be an effective motivational tool yet it is recommended that they are kept in line with the farm business objectives and financial limitations. Basically, don't promise a fortune if you can't afford it, no one will benefit if you run your business into the ground trying to keep your employees happy!

Make sure employees are aware of how their entitlements 'add up'

It is often not the actual wage or salary but how much they are paid compared to others that employees perceive as important. It can be misleading to just compare the cash received, a fair comparison needs to take the whole package into account such as responsibilities, hours worked, shift time and length, subsidised accommodation, travel, additional paid leave etc.

One-off rewards that are linked to performance are probably more manageable: a bonus rather than a pay increase. Another option that does not depend on cash flow is to share the growth of the farm business, for example a percentage of the profit.

Whatever you choose, make sure it will represent genuine reward to the staff member and that you are consistent and fair with the way you reward your employees.

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Non-financial rewards

Some people are driven by monetary rewards but others may value different things. They may be ambitious and career driven, enjoy increasing their responsibilities, find reward through social interaction, or through self-development and meaningful work.

Some ideas for non-financial rewards are:

- providing more flexible work arrangements such as part-time employment, job-sharing or hours that accommodate other interests
- offering opportunities for [training](#) and development, either on or off the job
- giving individuals a special project to manage
- giving individuals more freedom in the way they work
- grooming them for promotion, or promoting to higher duties or a new status
- supporting a social activity in the workplace
- participating in initiatives to improve employee health and well-being, or
- supporting their ability to participate in the workplace and community

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