Farmer managers today increasingly face staffing challenges. Whether hiring close to home or looking abroad, managers need to start thinking more seriously about human resource management.

FINDING FARM LABOUR is a challenge, and because of changing demographics and increased competition from other industry sectors, it's not likely to get any easier in the future.

According to a report released last May by the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council, primary agriculture employed 336,200 in 2008. The vacancy rate, however, was around 9%, with more than three in four of the employers surveyed reporting that they had at least one vacant position in their operation. These figures translate into more than 25,000 full-time job vacancies on farms across Canada.

When it comes to seasonal employment the situation is even worse. Employers reported a 20% vacancy rate for seasonal positions, an estimated 16,560 vacant jobs. Those involved in horticulture, which currently has the highest vacancy rate of any type of farming operation at 28%, anticipate they will need to find up to 52% more employees over the next five years.

Many producers may have to adopt different strategies if they want to successfully recruit and retain good staff, and that might mean learning some additional human resource skills.

"Whereas it used to be that producers hired their neighbours, now they have often to go through a more rigourous process because there is more competition for those same workers," says Lane Stockbrugger, Manager of Learning with Farm Credit Canada, which offers free workshops for producers on a host of issues, including recruitment and retention of workers.

The reality is that as farms get larger, the level and range of skills needed to operate them changes. Consequently, farm owners and managers are moving towards higher numbers of paid employees, that are non-family members, and find themselves facing HR issues they have not encountered before and may be ill equipped to deal with.

"It's a very different dynamic managing non-family members," says Wendell Joyce, Executive Director of the Canadian Farm Business Management Council. "The expectations of a salaried, non-family worker, who has no long-term stake in the enterprise, will be quite different from a family member who has the promise of taking ownership some day."

Looking Abroad

Adding to the difficulties of finding workers is the widely held perception that primary agriculture is not an attractive career option, especially amongst young people. "There's a lot of misinformation when it comes to the opportunities in agriculture," admits Danielle Vinette, Executive Director of CAHRC.

Working conditions, wages, and employment standards in agriculture are not always in line with other industries, and so it is little wonder that producers are turning to established immigrant communities and/or foreign workers to fill their employment gaps.

"The shortages are only going to get worse in the years ahead," says Doug Connery, Chair of the HR Committee of the Canadian Horticultural Council. "Canadians will have a lot more choices for high paying jobs. So for the lower paying jobs, we are going to have a real shortage of workers and that's where seasonal people coming into the country, or new immigrants, are going to become even more important than they are now."

Connery employs up to 140 full-time and seasonal staff each year on his 1,000 acre vegetable and fruit farm near Portage La Prairie, Manitoba. Around half of them are foreign workers.

Most foreign agricultural workers are brought to Canada through one of two federal programs; the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program, or the Temporary Foreign Worker Program.

These programs set out specific eligibility criteria and include a requirement for employers to try and fill vacancies from within Canada first. They outline what employment conditions must be offered, which are usually the same as provincial employment standards, and cover additional details such as provision of housing and formal employment contracts.

Attracting immigrant employees, however, can sometimes be problematic, especially when language barriers exist. Kroeker Farms Limited, a major vegetable producer in Winkler, Manitoba, has found that a strong company identity has helped it attract foreign workers.

"A lot of the low-German speaking people in our area will typically look for the company logo," says Ed Klassen, HR Manager for Kroeker's, which hires around 100 seasonal workers a year, largely from the local Mennonite community. "When they identify our logo in the paper and know we are hiring for something, they come to see what's available."

Making a Plan

Whether a farm is large or small, developing an HR plan to help with recruitment and retention of both permanent and seasonal workers is probably a good idea, says Joyce.

For most producers the information needed to do this is largely in their heads, gleaned from years of experience. The challenge is to translate that knowledge into a formal HR strategy that suits each situation. More and more producers are coming to the realization that they lack some of the HR skills they need to run their operations effectively, says Sue Selves, the HR Project Coordinator for the Ontario Pork Industry Council, which provides HR training and offers a basic toolkit to help develop an HR plan.

Those HR skills are just as important for retaining employees. A recent OPIC survey shows that employee engagement and appreciation rated far higher than monetary considerations in job satisfaction. "The number one thing for employees is being made to feel important and a part of the operation," says Selves.

There are a lot of other things that the agricultural industry as a whole needs to do to give it a competitive edge when seeking and retaining workers. These include having clear and uniform policies around working conditions and wages.

Unfortunately, there is considerable confusion and a lot of provincial disparity with labour regulations that apply to farm workers, as each provincial jurisdiction regulates and applies its own rules. Some provinces only recently extended employment standards to cover agricultural workers, and rules still vary widely by province for things like workers compensation, minimum wage requirements, hours of work, vacation pay, and employment of children and family members. Workers compensation coverage varies and may be compulsory for farm workers in some provinces and voluntary in others. Some provinces also made distinctions between different types of farm employment and apply different rules to each

An HR plan is also valuable to help with ongoing employee management, says Selves. "It's important to have an HR plan in effect so that when someone comes to you and asks about say, vacation pay, you already have a policy in place."

On the other hand, flexibility should still be a key component of any HR plan. "You are going to have to be flexible," says Connery. "I have a lot of different things that I do for different people. For some people it's the benefits

that are important, for some it's that they only want to work part-time. And I think that's where the real HR education for managers comes in, to help them recognize the needs of different employees, decide what it is they really need and work with them on that." Angela Lovell

AGRICULTURAL WORKERS AND EMPLOYMENT STANDARDS

	AB	BC[1]	SK[2]	MB[3]	ON[4]	QC[5]	NB[6]	NS	PE[7]	NL	YT[8]	NU NT
Weekly rest	x	x	x	✓	x	✓	x	x	x	✓	x	✓
Meal breaks	x	x	x	✓	x	✓	x	x	x	✓	x	✓
Reporting / Call in pay	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x	✓	✓	✓
Parental leave	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓
Compassionate care	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓
Bereavement leave	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	x
Family / sick leave	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	x
Child employ. restrictions	x	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Deductions	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓
Wage recovery	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Minimum wage	x	✓	x	✓	x	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓
Hours of work & overtime	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓
Paid general holidays	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x	✓	✓	✓
Paid vacation	x	✓	x	✓	x	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓
Maternity leave	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓
Termination notice	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓

For more information on the adendums 1-8 noted in this chart visit www.casa-acsa.ca/english/PDF/137-Hacault%20Abstract.pdf.

Source: From the report *Agriculture Labour – Meeting the Safety Requirements* by Marcel Hacault, Canadian Agriculture Safety Association.

For more information on recruiting farm labourers, visit:

Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program

www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/foreign_workers/sawp.shtml

Temporary Foreign Workers Program

www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/foreign_workers/temp_workers.shtml

Association of Workers Compensation Boards of Canada, 905-542-3633, www.awcbc.org/en/index.asp

Links for Provincial Government Labour Standards Agencies:

Alberta, 1-877-427-3731, http://employment.alberta.ca/SFW/1224.html

British Columbia, 250-387-0172, www.labour.gov.bc.ca/esb/

Manitoba, 1-800-821-4307, www.gov.mb.ca/labour/standards/

New Brunswick, 505-453-2597, www.gnb.ca/0308/index-e.asp

Newfoundland, 1-877-563-1063, www.hrle.gov.nl.ca/lra/labourstandards/default.htm

Nova Scotia, 902-424-5301, www.gov.ns.ca/lwd/

Ontario, 1-800-531-5551, www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/es/

Prince Edward Island, 902-368-6414, www.gov.pe.ca/cca/index.php3?number=1004723&lang=E

Quebec, 1-800-265-1414, www.cnt.gouv.qc.ca/en/home/index.html

Saskatchewan, 1-800-667-1783, www.labour.gov.sk.ca/ls/