

# RECRUITING AND RETAINING STAFF: ARE WE SELLING OURSELVES SHORT?

**Mark & Devon Slee  
Farmers, Melrose Dairy Ltd, Ealing**

As a business, over the course of 28 years, we have evolved from a staff base of three in 1995 to fifteen in 2015; from a single dairy unit operation to three dairy units and a support block. The level of complexity in the management of the operation has increased alongside the compliance required. We have needed to bring in others to do what we used to do ourselves, that realisation has given us strength but has also brought its own challenges. We must become better at managing staff, they are an essential part of running our farming business. For Devon and I this has been a path of self-discovery, of “plan-do-review” cycles and adapting to new realities.

Here’s some of our learnings that we have collected along the way:

- 1. If you are not prepared to put in the time and effort to recruit the right person from the start, then your chances of starting along the right path but with the wrong person increase exponentially.***

Recruiting the right person usually begins with the advertising. We sometimes hear of people having employed a not ideal candidate, so the question remains: why are you getting non-ideal candidates applying for the job you are offering? Let’s say that you have a good reputation as an employer, the questions to ask could be: Is it because you are not selling the job well enough? Is it because you are not advertising in the right places? Is it because you are targeting the wrong market? What is the accommodation on offer like?

Which of the above do you think may apply to your own case?

.....  
.....  
.....

---

Notes:

What puts people off applying for a job?

.....  
.....  
.....

An important part of advertising is the information we provide about ourselves and our business to any prospective employee. They have the same right to check our references than we have to check theirs. It is important for our full names and contact details to be advertised. Some people will approach us, have a chat and realize we are not what they are looking for or we realize they are not the right fit for us. We want them to do their homework on us before applying for the job.

What information do you provide about yourself in the ads? Would you change that?

.....  
.....  
.....

There are different websites and recruitment companies in which to place ads nowadays. We have started asking ourselves lately whether we need to start thinking a bit more carefully as to where we place our ads depending on what type of staff we are looking for. Rather than, “Well, people that want to find jobs in agriculture will go and look at Fencepost”, putting a bit more time into thinking, “I want this type of person to work with me, where are they? Where do they hang out? Where do their families, who know what these people are looking for, look for information?” If you are looking for a person that is new to our industry, or a single, young person that will have no trouble sharing accommodation with others, should we be advertising on Fencepost? Or rather in University publications? Or in the local newspaper where the families of those young people are looking for information? Or even on Facebook rather on specific agricultural websites?

If you think about the current position you might be recruiting for at the moment, what is the profile of person you are looking for? And where do you think they go for their information?

.....  
.....  
.....

Over the years, we have developed a process which focuses on interviewing no more than 3-4 people for the one position. This process will be different for different people, but here's what we do:

- Put our full names and contact details in the ad (phone and region)
- Clearly state that we require a CV and cover letter with references (this allows us to know who reads the whole ad and follows instructions provided)
- Once the applications arrive, we check CVs, cover letters and who the referees are
- We select those that we think are worth checking the referees and check them
- Then chose 3-4 of them for interview
- Interview on farm: the job interview starts from the moment they drive up the driveway (are they on time, what does the car look like, did they observe the speed limit of the farm?) to the moment they leave the farm
- We involve the right people in the interview process too; their manager needs to be there during the interview for example
- If they have a partner, we'd rather they were there at the interview too
- We have 2 ears and 1 mouth, we use them in that same proportion
- Our gut feel is also very important. If you feel that something is not quite right it usually isn't
- Then we discuss all applicants and make the job offer if we have our ideal candidate.

This whole process takes time, we understand that, but we'd rather do the due diligence to find that right fit.

***2. If you are not open to analysing your own performance as an employer, then you can't expect to do a good job analysing other people's performance.***

We have found over the years that part of becoming a good employer is that we recognise our strengths and more importantly our weaknesses. Looking at ourselves and working on what we need to improve on.

Being a good employer requires self-awareness, self-management and being honest with how you run yourself (know who and how you are). This will translate into the team culture you

---

Notes:

build, and increase your chances in hiring people that fit. The key words for us here are ethics and ethos. You have to know yourself, what you want and require, to know who you want around you.

Understanding why people leave us as employers can give us an idea of what we need to focus on. The answers are not always fun or nice to hear but give opportunities to review and implement any necessary changes. It helps us that there are two of us to bounce ideas and comments off; strong support systems are important.

Over time, our business has evolved and our focus naturally has changed. From one farm where we were very much hands on, to a business that requires us to step back and spend more time on operational and strategic planning.

Our focus now is on ensuring the next generation of farmers under our wing (our VOSM and Managers) have the right skills to move on down their own paths. We continuously ask ourselves and them, What is working well? What is not working well? How can we change it so it works?

### ***3. You cannot expect people to work harder than you. This is your business, not theirs.***

Your staff are not responsible for your business, you are. For us, our staff are there to help us achieve our goals, but not to achieve them for us.

If I am not prepared to stay past 6.00 pm to solve a problem in my farm, why would my staff be? If I am not prepared to put cups on, why would my staff be? If I am not prepared to respect their time off, why would my staff be? If I am not prepared to work around their request for time off, why would they respect my time off?

Treat others as you would like to be treated yourself.

### ***4. Know your people, respect their individuality and work with them.***

Empathy and kindness are important words for us. We acknowledge that each of our staff is an individual and they have different things that make them tick. Some are happy to come to work on time, do a good job, get paid, and go home to enjoy time with their families. They are happy to have the same level of responsibility every year and job security. Other staff are looking for progression and they want to learn and be challenged at work. Understanding these differences is key to providing each staff member with the best experience you can while they are working with you.

**5. *Whether a staff member is willing or difficult, work with them in good faith.***

Even if someone is disengaged, or underperforming, if you approach with them in good faith, working through issues, it can result in a win/win situation for all.

**6. *Look after your own reputation as an employer***

Be 100% honest in everything you do. It is our policy to offer to be a verbal referee, we generally don't provide written references.

**7. *Money is not the most important thing.***

Think about the job that you have on offer as a full package. It is not only the salary. You are offering a house to live in, a learning experience, a team culture, a work environment, a good roster, a chance to upskill.

What are you offering as an employer?

.....  
.....  
.....

**1. Conclusion**

The people that we employ are an invaluable asset and an integral part of running a healthy sustainable business.

“Would I like to work for me, live in on this farm and be part of this team?” This is ultimately the question we encourage you to ask yourselves as employers.

---

Notes: