

Labour in the agricultural sector

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In the debate over the labour market and the appropriate industrial relations regime for a self-reliant society, the role of labour in agriculture has been given relatively little emphasis.

But few industries are so reliant on an efficient labour force. In the agricultural sector, the direct linkage between labour laws and their business performance is well recognised.

During the early 1990s the National Farmers Federation, representatives of a wide range of farming industry groups, was at the forefront of the battle for industrial relations reform. Its fighting fund has financed some of the most important legal battles to protect the freedom to contract.

In September, the NFF released its *Labour Shortage Action Plan* for the farming sector.

Its analysis is simple. Labour shortages are already constraining the ability of the agricultural sector to supply domestic and international markets. Labour shortages are causing industry underperformance. The problem is likely to expand.

Instead of alleging that government is responsible and should provide a complete fix, most of the solutions lie with farmers themselves.

Skills: There is a broad but false perception that farming work is low-skilled, manual and low-paid. The fact is that farming has become high tech. There are pressing needs for people with high-level science, technology and advanced mechanical skills. Farms

have become incredibly automated. For example, large dairy herds are now milked using advanced technology with almost no human intervention. Remuneration rates for the associated technology work are high.

Even fruit and other picking work should be considered skilled. Farmers are realizing that if they don't think of this work as skilled and train people properly, they won't get the people or productivity they need to succeed.

Career paths: Most people think farming doesn't offer career opportunities. Successful farms are, however, big operations that take professional approaches to their business. Untapped career paths exist within these large businesses. Competition for top people is strong, offering career movement into different and varying work environments.

Self-Employment: Farming has always had high levels of self-employment. Opportunities are rapidly expanding, particularly in high-tech self-employment. The proposed *Independent Contractors Act* will act as an important development to secure self-employment opportunities.

Work Safety: It is well-known that farms have an unsafe reputation. Unfortunately, more farmers kill and injure themselves and their staff than in any other industry. Until this fact changes, people will understandably not want to work in agriculture. The NFF plans to initiate and sustain a work safe campaign to 'saturate the agriculture industry to such an extent that it creates substantial behavioural change by farmers to adopt farm safe practices'.

Human Resource Management: Farmers have not been totally professional in their approach to human resource management. Like any business area, human resources need investment, time and a professionally

structured approach. Without this, farms will not attract the required workforces. There are some outstanding successes where, through being professional in their HR approach, farms that had labour problems have achieved an ongoing solution.

Using on-hire services: Professional labour hire companies may charge for their services, but the end result can be a structured and professional resolution to labour demand. On-hire companies can organize labour across regions, crops and seasons and bring economies of scale to organizing labour that cannot be achieved by farms on their own. The opportunity is particularly strong for seasonal picking work and to solve the problem of illegal workers.

Remoteness: Technology is greatly altering problems of remoteness. Farmers need to emphasize structured approaches to attract and retain indigenous workers in remote areas.

Seasonal work: There is great demand for seasonal workers. Priority needs to be given to developing the backpacker and special visa-entry worker markets to supplement regional workforces. This, however, must be done within the package of changes mentioned above.

Vocational training: The flexibility of the New Apprenticeship scheme has been highly successful. Giving continued priority to tertiary and vocational training is essential.

Where there is the necessity of activity by government, it is merely to strengthen the capacity for farmers to manage their workforce—an objective which the reform of the labour market will greatly assist.

The main responsibility for resolving farm labour problems lies with farmers.

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