

A Note from the Editor

In the 'cold turkey' years after subsidies were withdrawn from farmers in the 1980s, belts had to be tightened and farm labour was an unnecessary cost. As a consequence farm work, (whether as employer or employee) lost its gloss. By the end of the 1990s, rural fortunes were improving but a shortage of farm staff rapidly became apparent. That led to the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry putting out a contract to investigate 'Skill and labour requirement in the primary sector', resulting in a report tagged 'People make the difference' (Morris, Tipples, Townshend, Mackay and Eastwood, 2001). Rural fortunes continued to improve into the new millennium and the labour shortages continued to bite due in part to the very low level of unemployment across the economy.

A pan primary Human Resources Workshop in Agriculture was held in Rotorua in July 2002, financed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry's Sustainable Farming Fund, to help address the issue. The Rotorua Workshop set up a pan industry organisation to address the staff and skills shortages, again with financial help from the Sustainable Farming Fund. Eventually, the organisation was called 'Human Capability in Agriculture and Horticulture' as the meeting at Rotorua had been set in the context of the Department of Labour's Human Capability Framework (Tipples, 2004a and b).

Persistent labour shortages led to a burst in primary industry labour research, some funded by Human Capability in Agriculture and Horticulture, while other research was supported by commodity-levy funded industry bodies such as Dairy InSight. The labour shortages also stimulated student thesis and dissertation work. Human Capability in Agriculture and Horticulture initiated a range of projects, from a foundational initial Research Stocktake of the sector's human and social research (Tipples and Wilson, 2005) to a range of pragmatic activities, such as the coordinated promotion of rural careers.

Innovative responses to the shortages came from all parts of New Zealand. Some of these initiatives established long lasting practical measures which have continued to address the problems of the long term nature of the staff shortages. One such initiative in the remote Amuri basin of North Canterbury led to the formation of the *Amuri Dairy Employers Group* (ADEG), which addressed the problems of its locality by developing the first New Zealand employment relations model of its type. It developed its own Code of Employment Practice before the Good Employer code resulting from the Employment Relations Act 2000. Further it established employer training to help recruit and retain quality dairy farm staff for the Amuri. Extensive employee training opportunities were also provided as well as a social programme to help combat the isolated nature of the area. The group established its own logo for members to use, helping to identify them as 'approved' employers. To help achieve employer compliance with the approved standards, Investors in People were engaged to audit member employer practices, with a focus on improvement and achievement of the desired standards. The activities of the group radically reduced employee turnover, reduced time to fill vacancies, and provided good numbers of quality applicants for jobs with good skills (Edkins, 2003; Edkins and Tipples, 2003).

The role of training for developing farm staff has also been highlighted by Nicky Murray, whose PhD thesis looked at skill formation as part of the broader employment relations landscape. Good training practices are now seen as essential to maintain the high rates of growth of labour productivity which the sector has experienced, which are essential to maintain international competitive advantage for New Zealand's agricultural exports. Murray's case study of agricultural training "Knowledge and skill 'down on the farm': Skill formation in New Zealand's agricultural sector" is the first article in this Australasian issue on the primary sector.

The second article is by Ruth Nettle, whose article with Mark Paine and John Petheram "The Employment Relationship – a conceptual model developed from farming case studies" appeared in this journal last year. Nettle has been involved in 'in-depth' qualitative research on dairy farm employment relations in rural Victoria, work which aligns with Edkins' research described above. Essentially, both have demonstrated that little changes until dairy farmers undergo a real change of values, which enables them to avoid the recruitment and retention problems previously described. Nettle reports how learning interventions can improve farm employment relationships. She suggests that traditional approaches, such as improving HRM procedures to reduce recruitment and retention problems, are not particularly effective and that a significant cultural change is necessary. Then she reports on two 'learning interventions – the first involves only the employer while the second intervention involves both employers and employees – and concludes that appropriate learning interventions can catalyse employment change. If dairy farms are considered to be a specialist form of small business, then these conclusions have significant ramifications for improving employment relations in all forms of small business.

The third article addresses the downstream processing sectors for meat products. Marjorie Jerrard looks at the meat industry in Australia and New Zealand, which she also covered in her PhD. As she points out, change is an on-going process on both sides of the Tasman. Collective activity, which was not apparent in the primary production sector, is very evident but often strongly opposed. Consequently, the meat industry, which is a form of production-line technology, has experienced its share of industrial strife. However, that has been less apparent in recent times and Jerrard concludes by describing the unions as survivors of various restructuring processes, and the employers as the winners.

The fourth article addresses a different type of problem, the employment relations of the supply chain from New Zealand to markets in the northern antipodes, typically in Europe, but most particularly in this case in the United Kingdom. Although research on waterfront conflicts has occurred (e.g. Green, 2001) no previous account seems to have addressed this particular issue, the employment relations of what must be, in geographical terms, some of the world's longest supply chains. The article focuses on a major problem for most of New Zealand' agricultural export industries: how to get seasonal produce from the New Zealand paddock to the British plate in best and most marketable condition. To highlight the employment relations concerns of the supply chain a case study is made of New Zealand apples. This case study was facilitated by excellent

cooperation from World Wide Fruit Ltd., the largest importer of fruit into the UK market, who provided critical information.

With primary sector exports forming such a significant part of the New Zealand economy, a detailed consideration of the employment relations of the sector seemed much overdue. It is hoped that readers will find the papers both informative and thought provoking.

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References

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