



More cows, more people

As herds grow, it takes more employees to get the work done . . . and the skills, characteristics and backgrounds of these employees can vary greatly.

by Jennifer Blazek and Trisha Wagner

AS THE dairy industry continues to trend toward larger herd sizes, farm owners find themselves managing people as much as they manage cows. The ability to manage people varies widely from farm to farm.

In the past, human resource management was informal or nonexistent, but now employed labor has become the norm on many farms. Cultural diversity, communication and training are all human resource concerns for today's farm operators, especially where agricultural workers are of different cultural backgrounds than their employers.

To get a handle on employee management, the University of Wisconsin-Extension conducted a survey of Wisconsin farms. A total of 220 producers from 38 counties completed the survey.

The average dairy herd size was 526 milking cows and 414 heifers. The smallest herd had 30 milking cows, and the largest herd had 5,600 milking cows. The participating farms represented over 1,900 employees. This survey found, while there is still variability, most Wisconsin farm operators now take a direct role in managing their employees.

Rewarding good work

Compensation varied by region of the state, job position and experience level. Herdsmen were paid more than any other position. Hourly wages were paid by 89 percent of farms, but 46 percent of herdsmen earned an annual salary.

Besides wages, farm employers offer compensation in the form of fringe benefits and bonuses. Thirty-six percent offered a bonus or incentive plan to employees, most commonly for milk quality measured by somatic cell count. Almost three-quarters of surveyed farms offered some kind of nonmonetary compensation, including housing, meat or dairy products and continued education. Most also offered paid vacation and sick days.

Evaluating and rewarding employee per-

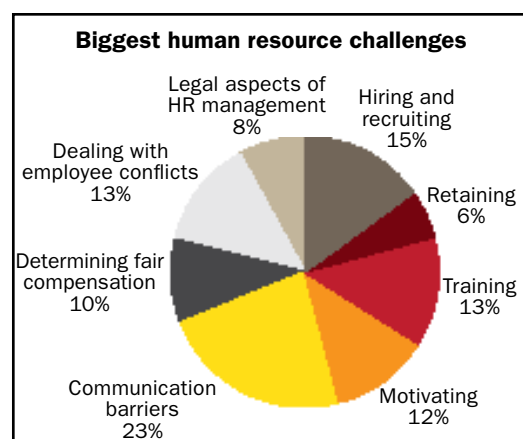
formance is a basic aspect of human resource management, and yet it is very inconsistently executed among farm managers. When asked whether farms perform regular performance reviews with employees, only 42 percent of managers responded that they do.

Of those employers who answered "yes" to this question, almost half (49 percent) stated that performance reviews of employees were conducted annually. Twenty-six percent performed them on a semi-annual or every six-month basis. Of the 78 total responses to the question, just seven managers reported performing employee evaluations monthly or more frequently.

Since raises are often an indication of positive employee performance and effort, farm managers were asked the method they use to determine whether an employee receives a raise. The principal method, as reported by close to half of the respondents, is a combination of time — how long the employee has been working for the farm — and skill.

Bringing new employees on board

Even though hiring outside labor is becoming more commonplace, few farms actually implement basic human resource management practices. These practices include having training materials, employment information and employee work schedules written down and accessible to employees.



MOST DAIRY FARMERS like working with cows best, but managing employees is a necessary part of the job, too.

Employee handbooks cover general employment information, whereas standard operating procedures deal exclusively with the work being done by employees and can be used as training materials. The survey showed that 57 percent of the farms do not have written standard operating procedures for employees, while more, 69 percent, do not have an employee handbook.

Regular meetings with employees are another basic component of human resource management. Fifty-four percent of the survey respondents conduct regular meetings with the majority of employees present. These meetings, whether held individually or in a group, offer training opportunities and help managers provide timely feedback to employees.

Over 37 percent of the farms in this survey hold employee meetings on a monthly basis, and some more often. This is unsurprising as these meetings are often opportunities for managers to touch base with their employees and to offer training to improve employee performance. It is reasonable to assume that dairy farm managers may coincide employee meetings with receiving the milk test results in order to provide feedback on milking procedures and give promotions based on low somatic cell counts.

A more diverse workforce

Farm employees varied in their education level. The largest majority (42 percent) had a high school education. Thirteen percent had a college or technical school degree. Twenty-two percent had less than a high school degree, and another 22 percent had an unknown level of education.

When farm managers were asked what their biggest challenges were in terms of human resources (see figure), communication barriers were identified as the biggest issue on farms for 23 percent of respondents. Hiring and recruiting employees was the top challenge for 15 percent of the farms. Training employees and dealing with employee conflicts were other challenges that ranked high with farm employers.

Farm owners face a unique challenge in that the majority of their employees may be of a cultural background and speak a language different than their own, making communication difficult. Employment materials, such as schedules and procedures, need to be translated into Spanish.

Written materials alone may not be sufficient as employees may have low educational levels and be unable to read Spanish. Also, as many employees do not speak or completely understand English, interpreting is necessary for accurate and thorough understanding between employer and employee. While some farm operators are interested in learning Spanish in order to better communicate with their employees, the majority of managers do not have an inclination, the time or the ability to learn another language.

The nature of the work being done on farms, as well as the long hours, can result in employee burnout and high turnover. Conflict among employees and high stress levels also work to undermine the ability of farms to keep workers. On top of that, cultural and linguistic differences of employees can make it even more challenging to work effectively with and retain employees.

One manager said, "I would like to know more about ways to keep my employees motivated and how to keep them happy." This comment and others indicate a greater interest and concern in retaining employees. We believe future opportunities to provide manager training in this area of human resources abound. 🐄