

Staff Hold the Key to Pig Farm Sustainability

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UK - Most successful pig producers will say that skilled, enthusiastic and committed staff are the most important part of their businesses. Yet for many, finding and retaining employees is the toughest challenge they face.

In the UK, a report by land-skills council Lantra says that agriculture and its related industries need 60,000 new entrants by 2023 to remain competitive.

But attracting those staff is proving difficult, particularly in the pig sector. Lantra says that 60 per cent of staff vacancies in agriculture are hard to fill, with lack of skills being blamed for almost a third of shortages.

Skill deficiencies are only part of the problem, however. A turbulent time in the pig industry, with input costs spiralling while returns dwindle, means that the industry has done more to advertise its woes rather than appeal to new staff.

And thanks to unfavorable media coverage and negative public perceptions of large-scale pig units, it's a sector that many would-be workers consider dirty, hard work, unskilled and unrewarding.

Changing perceptions

For UK pig farmer Richard Longthorp, who farms a 1,200-sow unit in East Yorkshire, changing those perceptions is a first step in tackling the problem.

"The industry just hasn't sold itself well enough in the past," he says.

"We have spent a lot of time talking about trying to get prices up, and that sends a mixed message. On the one hand, we're saying things are difficult, then we're trying to recruit people. It doesn't work.

"When my son got his exam results the headmaster congratulated him on his excellent marks, and then said: 'Isn't it a shame you just want to be a pig farmer?'

"As long as that perception persists, no matter what a farmer does, the industry will struggle to attract people."

Coordinated approach

To encourage people to think of pig production as a viable, long-term career, Mr Longthorp says the industry needs to adopt a coordinated approach to training and development.

To this end, Mr Longthorp has joined forces with other pig-industry leaders to develop a supply-chain-wide scheme to encourage people to see pig production as a worthwhile career.

“There are a lot of projects going on with regards to training and careers in agriculture, but it’s all ad hoc and doesn’t have a coordinated approach,” he says. “We are trying to put them into a framework so that they have more impact.

“The solution is in the hands of the pig industry, as well as consumers and the government,” he adds.

“Just as investing in new kit needs confidence and capital, so does investing in people. If we have stronger supply chains with more stability, it gives confidence.”

Filling the gaps

In addition to attracting staff, a more coordinated approach to training will give producers the support they need to develop sustainable businesses, Mr Longthorp says.

“Often farmers will see a course at the local college and send people to it, but it needs to be the other way around.

“Farmers should sit down and analyse the skills the business needs and those their current staff have and develop a training program which fills those gaps.”

For Danish pig farmer Asger Krogsgaard, his approach to staff development and retention has been instrumental in helping his 100-sow business grow to one that produces 22,000 piglets and 33,000 slaughter pigs a year.

After struggling to make a profit when market volatility caused piglet prices to drop, he realised he needed to expand production to develop a slaughter pig enterprise, but there was no land available near the family farm.

His solution was to buy several sites around the Ringkøbing in western Jutland and utilise staff to help him manage each of them as efficiently as possible.

Focus on efficiency

Part of the approach was to implement systems that were designed with efficiency in mind — something he says Danish producers have not thought about enough in recent years.

In addition to automated weigh scales, which make it easier for staff to track pig growth, he installed automated feeding systems and an easy loading system that allows truck drivers to collect the pigs without staff being present.

But it's not just the investment in infrastructure that makes Krogsgaard's business an appealing place to work: His approach to staff development, management and providing facilities for them is key, too.

"I couldn't operate my business without my workers," he says. "I can't be on the farm all the time, so I have to give them responsibilities so I know someone is there every day and doing the job well.

"I know that to have the number of pigs I produce, and to run the business the way I do, that I need to have excellent conditions."

Good working conditions

According to Mr Krogsgaard, his staff say their biggest priorities are having a good working day and an excellent environment to work in.

"Yes, the payment has to be okay and we are part of an employment union which makes sure we pay a good basic wage and holiday and sickness pay," he says.

"But it's fundamental that conditions — like the places to change their clothes, the wash room and coffee room — are good.

"It's a condition at our place that you can't bring your own lunch box," he adds. "They have to eat on the farm and they pay for the food.

"When they start, some of them will ask if they can save money by bringing their own food, but I say no because we have to eat together around the table.

"They soon realise that it's a good way because you get the social aspect, and we talk freely about the job — what we're doing well and where we could be doing things better."

'Managing pigs is easy — managing people is difficult'

It's this element of "people management" that Mr Longthorp says more pig producers have to appreciate if staff are to feel encouraged and incentivised to stay in a job long-term.

“A lot of the time people feel more confident in the technical aspects of running a pig farm, but they could actually do with looking at their people-management skills,” he says.

“Managing pigs is easy; it’s managing people that’s difficult. Getting people management right is the key to everything.”

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