

Hire, train, and keep a highly motivated workforce: A workshop for green industry managers

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Significance to industry

Among the risks agricultural producers face, human resource management risks are possibly the most neglected, but have been identified as a major threat to business survival. Based upon prior published works, five types of labor-related risks have been identified as being pertinent in agriculture and the green industry: (1) not getting essential tasks completed, (2) tasks being done poorly or not in a timely manner, (3) incurring high indirect labor expenses, (4) conflict with employees, (5) incurring fines or having penalties imposed for violation of laws and regulation or the cost of proving compliance with the laws and regulations. Helping managers to better

recognize, deal with, and safeguard against labor related risks reduces employee turnover and increases farm productivity. Measures taken to alleviate labor risks also tend to reduce workplace accident rates and related health problems. In addition, they typically contribute to improved quality of work life for employees.

Workshop description

Based on knowledge gained through focus group discussions with owners and managers of nurseries, landscape businesses, and greenhouses, as well as in-depth interviews with managers, supervisors, and non-supervisory personnel, an educational workshop was developed and conducted. The one-day workshop addressed human resource management practices to mediate labor risks. It was held in Grand Rapids on July 09, 2003. The following topics were included in the workshop program:

1. Recruiting and selecting the best employees
2. Training your employees for high performance
3. Managing with constructive feedback
4. Building relationships with a diverse workforce
5. Chalking the field: the key to satisfied and productive employees

Several speakers were used at the workshop, including project consultants. Evaluations of the workshop have been very positive (7.9 on a 10-point scale). Workshop participants particularly liked the variety of speakers addressing different issues. ☞

High-involvement work practices in the Michigan green industries

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Significance to industry

Michigan plant industries face the challenge of attracting and retaining qualified labor. High-involvement work practices have helped other industries develop a proactive approach to human resource management and productivity. These practices have been introduced in innovative Michigan green industry operations but are not yet widespread. Adaptation to industry structure and business strategies is in an early phase. A particular challenge to introducing employee involvement practices in plant production and related services is the seasonality issue. Research on these practices in agriculture is virtually non-existent.

Goals and objectives

1. Identify human resource management practices prevalent in Michigan's nursery and landscape industries.

2. Identify specific human resource management challenges for Michigan's nursery and landscape industries.
3. Compare the human resource management practices in Michigan's nursery and landscape industries to proven practices in other industries.

Project description

Based upon the findings of focus group discussions with owners and managers of nursery and landscape business (see *Nursery and Landscape Projects and Programs*, 2002) an interview guide was developed to assess human resource management strategies in-depth. Six nurseries, 4 landscapers and 4 greenhouse producers participated in the intensive case studies. A total of 47 separate interviews (e.g., managers, middle managers, and staff) were conducted. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The data will continue to be analyzed in detail and results will be further refined.

Results and discussion

Larger and more successful operations are more conscientiously managing their human resources. On one hand, this is borne out of necessity because a small number of employees allows for more informal procedures, individual treatment, and leading by example of the owner. Large operations need more formal procedures to function. Individual treatment needs to be replaced by guidelines and policies. Clearly communicated goals and a vision lead the middle managers, who in turn lead and motivate the lower ranked employees. On the other hand, defined organizational structures and clear human resource guidelines and policies enable sustained growth and profitable operations.

Human resource management practices in successful operations have established retention rates of 80% and above, which include employees returning to the same operation after several months of layoff due to seasonal variation in labor demand. Reducing voluntary turnover is a goal related to cost reduction and quality assurance. While data from other industries suggest turnover costs equal 100% or more of the annual salary of an employee, costs tend to be lower in agriculture depending on recruitment and selection methods and the training needed to adequately perform a task. Since hiring a mostly Hispanic workforce with strong extended family relations and networks has led to employee referral as the preferred recruitment method of non-supervisory employees for a majority of the research participants, recruitment costs have been reduced. Simultaneously, selection has ceased to be a concern for many managers, further reducing turnover costs. However, training has become more difficult with many employees commanding a limited capacity of the English language. Providing a high quality product requires a well-trained and motivated workforce.

Retention plays a paramount role for supervisory and management positions, where significant training investments in employees are and specific know-how and experience are accumulated. In addition, recruitment and selection for supervisory positions are more expensive. Although promotion from within is a strategy common in most operations, it is not always an option and not necessarily less expensive than advertisements and selection procedures, because the employee will require supervisory training to achieve optimum results.

The most common training method is the so-called mentoring or buddy system where the new employee is assigned to an experienced co-worker who is responsible to introduce the new employee to work procedures and the culture of the operation. In very small operations the owner also teaches by example and explanation. In very large operations, the supervisors can have the sole or additional training responsibilities, but the buddy system is most common.

Training also plays a major role in ensuring workplace safety and preventing accidents. While the use of machinery is typically restricted to explicitly trained individuals, eye injuries, slip and fall, and repetitive motion, related health problems are a concern in many operations. In addition, some employees consider exposure to pesticides a health risk.

For many employees hourly wages are a source of dissatisfaction or a reason to consider alternative employment. While respectful treatment and fairness do create loyal employees, a higher wage could lure many experienced employees into other sectors as soon as jobs become available. Few managers are countering this risk by offering productivity bonuses. Several managers are offering seasonal bonuses for employees who stay for the season. The most common retention tool is the yearly merit raise. However, merit raises are often limited by job category and amount of profit available for distribution.

Managers, supervisors, and employees perceive communication as a major challenge. Information sharing with employees is rather limited. Employees hardly ever receive specific financial data. This information is restricted to the upper management or family members and sometimes office personnel. General financial information is shared at formal or informal meetings. Regular meetings are used as tools for sharing information, improving relationships, and generating employee input. However, employee suggestions, particularly from English second language employees, are more likely to come up in individual conversations.

Teamwork is prevalent in the participating operations. Quality and timeliness of production often depend on employees' cooperation and coordination. Yet, formal team based bonuses or other incentive systems to encourage team performance are rare. Employees not working well with their team will be given the opportunity to work with a different team, but coworker pressure is likely to coerce such individuals into looking for alternative employment. 