

Too many farmers dwelling in the past

By Devon Brooks

Speaking at the BCFGA's Horticultural Forum in Penikese, the Okanagan School of Business' Lee Cartier takes a strong academic stance on the issue of labour shortages. He begins with a slide showing what different sectors are paying and how attractive they are to new workers.

It is no surprise that more money, whether directly through a paycheque or by way of benefits and perks, gets more attention from newcomers.

His studies show that the cumulative benefit getting a young person's attention is around the \$20/hour mark. Average starting rates in the agricultural sector are about half that - coming in at \$10.

But that is secondary to Cartier, who takes nothing for granted though, not even that there is a shortage.

He asks, "Is there a shortage of labour in the Okanagan, and if so, how are farmers' dealing with the shortage?" The answer, taken as an obvious fact by most, is not as clear cut as one might think.

Cartier defines a labour shortage as being an actual shortage of bodies to work (what he terms part of the "external labour environment"). The alternative is a shortage of people willing to work for employers deemed undesirable. This is part of part of the internal business environment.

What makes a place undesirable can be attributed to many different causes from poor pay to bad management, although not every factor is because of a fault on the part of the employer.

In the external labour environment Cartier says, "The Okanagan has one of the fastest age growth brackets in Canada, but not in the age bracket farmers need."

In the south Okanagan and Similkameen, an astounding 37% of the population is over the age of 65.

And workers in the 20 to 40 age bracket are leaving the area at a rate of 2% per year. "That's the age bracket," says Cartier, "that provides farm labour."

Age trends combined with the relative low money means agriculture will be challenged to get the workers it needs from the local population.

That's the bad news. The worse news is that this situation will probably continue for years to come. "The labour supply will be at its worst in the 2010s and the 2020s. It won't start to recover until the late 2020s and 2030s."

Cartier realizes farmers can't compete directly with other sectors monetarily, but he says there are creative solutions if they look at employees like other external factors. If a farmer couldn't afford a particular tractor

Lee Cartier and BCFGa president Joe Sardinha discuss different ideas for recruiting and keeping good workers in the tight labour environment of the Okanagan Valley.

Is there a shortage of labour in the Okanagan region, and if so, how are farmers dealing with the shortage?

Presented by:
Lee Cartier, P. Ag.
Okanagan School of Business

because of the expense he would have to find another way to get the job done.

In the case of employees the trick is to get workers personally involved with the business. "We need," he says, "to look at them as partners in the business, as stakeholders."

If it all seems like pie-in-the-sky academic talk Cartier points out there are successful agricultural businesses in the region that are getting good workers every year.

In his study 71 local agricultural business owners in the wine, grape, fruit farming, processing, agri-tourism and nutraceutical businesses were surveyed. While 66/71 agreed there

was a labour shortage, eight of the 71 had established a waiting list for employees who wanted to work for them while another 14 had no problem finding good workers. In total almost a third of those surveyed reported success in getting good help while a slightly larger number, 24/71 had no workers at all.

The disparity can be attributed, at least in part, to how the farmers approach potential employees. Too many, he warns, are clinging to hiring and working conditions reflective of the 20th century.

Most farms are relying on internal networks to get the help they need despite the fact that the majority

reported that the system is not working well. When it goes really wrong the most common solutions are to seek some kind of government subsidy, bring in extra professional workers if they can afford them or offer better housing.

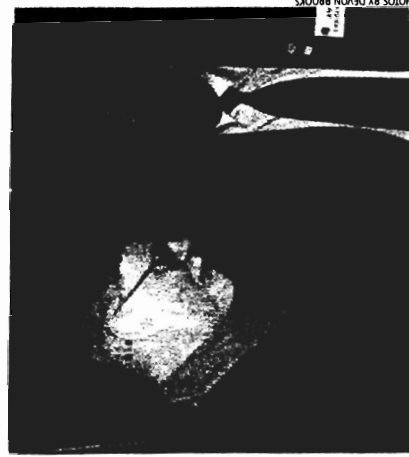
Cartier says a sign at a local Rona store offered conditions attractive to the most populous new worker around: the senior. The sign advertised a fun atmosphere; flexible shifts; part time hours to suit the worker; no heavy lifting; meeting new people and a great work environment.

In contrast he says a typical farm sign says: 'Now hiring.'

From employees Cartier determined seven factors that were most appealing. In order they are:

- being well treated by management;
- flexible work conditions;
- good pay;
- good working conditions;
- enjoyable working atmosphere;
- a pleasant outdoor environment; and
- other.

Cartier gives a blunt warning to farmers: "You're all struggling to find what 21st century businesses need to do."



PHOTOS BY DEVON BROOKS