

Becoming an employer of choice

Thomas Lawton¹, Suzanne Groome², Martina Gormley³,
Pat Clarke³ and Marion Beecher¹

¹Teagasc, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Moorepark, Fermoy, Co. Cork;

²Teagasc, Dromin Road, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary; ³Teagasc, Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Mellows Campus, Athenry, Co. Galway.

Summary

- Good communication and training opportunities are the main characteristics employees seek from their employer.
- Of 315 dairy farmers surveyed, 77% did not issue payslips to employees.
- Improvements are required regarding fair treatment and respect of employees, including compliance with employment law.

Introduction

The limited availability of highly skilled labour is challenging farmers to review their work management practices. A clear set of work practices enables employers to provide a positive and efficient working environment that will in turn ensure top quality employee performance. Effective employment management can improve profitability, decrease employee turnover and lead to a satisfactory employment relationship. The attractiveness of dairy farming as a career relies on the satisfactoriness of the employment relationship between the employer (farmer) and their employee.

Materials and methods

Two studies were conducted to ascertain the characteristics of a positive working environment;

Study 1

Seventeen semi-structured interviews were carried out with dairy farm employers and employees, nine with employers and eight with employees, all of whom were in separate employment relationships. A thematic analysis was then carried out on the data to understand what characterises a satisfactory employment relationship for both the employer and employee.

Study 2

Three hundred and fifteen dairy farmers representative of location and herd size were surveyed regarding work organisation and employment practices. Of the farmers surveyed, 62% were employing one or more people. Herd size ranged from 25 to 700 cows. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and the responses were collected by post or by phone.

Results and discussion

The results of the two studies are summarised below. According to the interviews, the top two characteristics an employee looks for in an employer are:

Good communication skills and training

According to employees, to be considered a satisfactory employer, it is necessary to be a good communicator and provide appropriate training opportunities. One of the ways farmers can improve their communication skills is by incorporating standard operating

procedures (SOPs) onto their farms. Standard operating procedures provide employees with a framework for completing jobs while minimising dependence on the employer for constant direction. Results from the survey indicate that 30% of the farmers surveyed (n=315) use written SOPs on their farm with herd sizes ranging from 40 to 550 cows. Milking and feeding SOPs were the most commonly used SOPs on farm.

Compliant with employment law

A common theme that persisted throughout the interviews was the fair treatment and respect of employees in terms of pay and holidays. Compliance with the regulations of the Workplace Relations Commission in Ireland is compulsory for employers. It is the farmer's responsibility to ensure that they are providing a good working environment regarding animal and employee facilities, fair working hours and holiday provisions for employees. Farmers keeping track of hours worked and payroll can be the difference between satisfied and dissatisfied employees. Results from the survey indicate a substantial proportion of farmers do not comply with employment practices such as not issuing a payslip to employees after each payment or recording employee details (Figure 1).

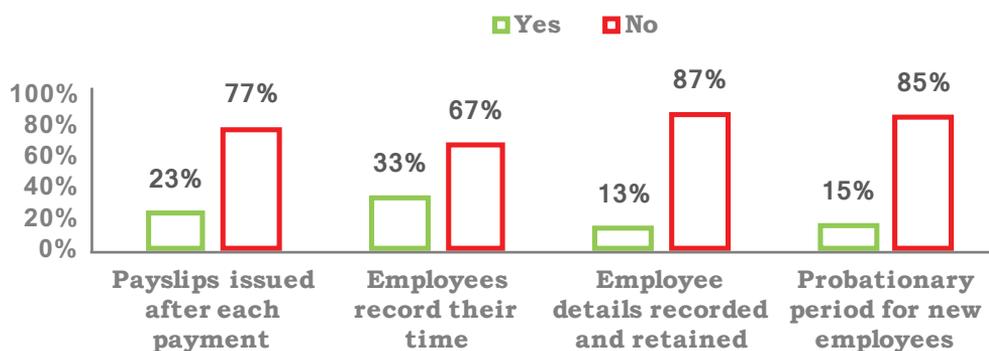


Figure 1. Employment practices on Irish dairy farms (n=315)

Conclusions

There is scope for improvement regarding employment practices on Irish dairy farms. The results of both studies highlight that by improving communication skills, offering appropriate training opportunities and complying with the employment law, farmers can become better employers.