

Labour and Skills Shortage in Rural WA
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Labour is an essential part of any primary industry. In recent years the Western Australian (WA) rural industries have been under increasing pressure from labour shortages. While the unemployment rate for Australia was 4.4% in September 2007 and 3.2% for Western Australia, unemployment in some rural areas was running as low as 1% to 2%. Agriculture, forestry and fishing made up 11% of businesses for Australia as a whole in 2006 but made up most of business in the rural regions of WA yet figures are not collected by the Department of Employment Workplace Relations on the extent of the employment in this sector. Job advertisement figures for agriculture and agribusiness jobs in WA for the quarter ended March 2009 (Australian Council of Agriculture Deans) indicating the demand for workers is back up to similar levels as boom at the end of 2007 and beginning of 2008.

Therefore research was carried out to determine:

1. the extent of a shortage of skilled and unskilled labour in grains, sheep, equine, farm input supply, agricultural mechanics and rural transport industries
2. the impact of the labour shortage
3. the reasons for the shortage of skilled & unskilled labour
4. what suggestions businesses had to address the labour shortage problem

Secondary research of existing literature was followed by in-depth interviews of industry employers and experts and focus groups of workers in each of the industries. Based on these results a structured questionnaire was developed and 632 surveys collected by Curtin University final year agribusiness degree students from Muresk in April and May 2008 at field days and other events through the agriculture region of Western Australia.

Nearly all people surveyed agreed it had been increasingly difficult to find labour in the last 2 years. Shortage of labour was highest for rural mechanics (97%) followed by rural transport (96%), sheep and wool (92%), grains (88%), farm input supplies (87%) and then equine industries (74%).

More than two thirds had seen a change in business operations as a result of labour shortages. The biggest effect has been on existing people working longer hours, higher stress levels and less family time. There was also an impact on restricted business expansion or contraction of the business, inability to take advantage of opportunities, loss of production and employment of unskilled labour.

The most significant problem in finding labour was finding skilled labour that was experienced and to a lesser extent with specialised skills or recognised training. The other significant problem was more availability generally and availability when required such as seasonally and casually.

The main reasons for shortages in labour and skilled labour was primarily the income or wage structure and competition from other industries such as mining. The other reasons were varied and were categorised into related issues such as whether jobs created satisfaction through having variety in tasks, teamwork and appealing to a personal interest in the industry. Problems were related to stresses in jobs such as danger, lack of job security, pressure to meet deadlines, extra skills required, poor work conditions as well as teamwork and industry image. Other problems were more related to lifestyle of jobs including the community facilities available and isolation. The length of hours of work and inflexibility of hours was another issue. Others had concerns about training including accessibility to training facilities, relevancy of training as well as lack of training facilities, assessors and supervisory staff.

Addressing these issues was seen as ways to attract more workers. Nearly everyone agreed to the need to increase the income offered. Just over half agreed with offering better working conditions and nearly half for guaranteed employment. Fewer agreed to government and education related suggestions such as government subsidy/allowance, government loan for training costs of apprentices/trainees (low paid workers), vocational education training while at high school and structured workplace learning while at high school, more diverse courses and more short courses.

Most unprompted suggestions related to training included providing incentives and loans to cover training costs, more intensive and directly relevant courses, more training assessors and facilities in rural areas, more immigrant training and more apprenticeships and cadetships.

Other open ended suggestions were to get more workers and long term workers including recruiting people from the city, the mining industry, education institutions and immigrants.

The labour shortage may be addressed to some extent by using more formal job search methods as few respondents were using employment agencies or advertisements. Most respondents were using informal methods to find workers.

Another way to address the labour shortage is to publicise support available to employers and potential workers in industries where the shortage is problematic. Nearly a quarter of respondents were unsure of details and less than half of respondents were aware of the assistance available - zone tax rebates for remote employees, apprenticeship/trainee incentives for business, \$800 tool allowance for apprentices/trainees, FarmBis training subsidy (now called Farm Ready), travel allowance for apprentices/trainees, 500/per year completed of apprenticeship and harvest Trail (casual worker co-ordination).

Further detailed results on the research and specifics for each industry sector are available from Dr Christine Storer, Muresk campus of Curtin University's Department of Agribusiness and Wine Science 9690 1522 or c.storer@curtin.edu.au.

