



Industrial Relations

getting it right from the start!

www.farmrecruit.com.au provides guidelines for farmers on how to get recruitment and induction right. It also gives contact details of the State Farmer Associations which can provide specific advice for farmers on recruitment, induction and employment practices.

"Be aware and get it right in the first place." This is the message made clear and strong by Denita Harris, Industrial Relations Advocate for the National Farmers' Federation. This means farmers need to ask questions about recruitment and induction, know their rights and responsibilities as employers, find the right person for the job in the first place, and get into good employment patterns right from day one.

If the basics of being an employer are understood and applied, this will save many farmers from getting burnt and lead to fewer problems down the track. From Denita's experience, it can be very painful to the "hip pocket" for those employers who don't get it right.

"It only takes one disgruntled employee to cost serious money," said Denita.

"If you get your human resource practices right, at the start, then you won't need an industrial relations lawyer down the track to help you out of the mess. It's a risk management strategy."

However, most farmers are not human resource specialists and do not have the resources to use HR professionals each time they need a new farm hand. Even so, Denita encourages farmers to take a proactive approach.

Other common problems are related to inadequate induction and training, deficiencies in communication or poor record keeping. "Sometimes things just don't work out", so there may be the need to dismiss an employee, but good recruitment, induction and employment practices can help avoid common problems.

When recruiting new staff, a farmer needs to consider both physical and mental attributes. To get the right person for the job, a farm manager almost has to carry out a psychological assessment of the person, asking themselves:

Does this person have a good attitude?

Will their personality fit in with the team?

What are their skill attributes?

Can they deal with factors such as isolation, the environment and lack of social support?

It is important to find a personality that fits in with the current staff, especially if they will be a long term full-time member. This becomes particularly important if the farm hits hard times.

Denita emphasises the importance of proper induction and training. Both the new employee and the existing staff need to feel comfortable for employee morale to be maintained. The induction process should be detailed and although it takes time it will lead to fewer problems and be cost effective in the long run. Farming is a high risk industry, so occupational health and safety is a vital step in the induction process. If new employees aren't correctly trained from the outset and something goes wrong the employer is likely to be held responsible. Poor paperwork is another area where employers can be caught out. In one example a farmer failed to keep timesheet records. The employee had kept his own because he knew his boss hadn't and later made a successful claim for underpayment.

Ms Harris urges farmers to join and use their Industry Associations as much as possible. One tangible benefit of membership is the day to day industrial advice that Associations can provide. Experienced advisors are employed to help people through a whole range of industrial processes. They have a range of tools and resources that farmers can use and would prefer a few phonecalls from farmers seeking advice at the start, than see them get into trouble later on, over issues that could have been avoided.

"We are keen to see the employer take that opportunity up, for the ultimate success of their business and to not feel uncomfortable in seeking support."

Awareness of award rates is important for farmers. Employers need to realise that claims can be made well after the employee has left the workplace.

"You can't assume your employee won't complain later," said Denita. "If you want to take a risk in breaching the award, it doesn't take much for that to be proven."

Breaches of awards can include the informal practice of giving alternative rewards. Such situations are often mutually agreed between employer and employee. While both parties may be happy with the arrangement, if it is not formally noted then any variation from the award can be deemed as a breach.

Denita believes in a 'holistic approach' when it comes to recruiting and induction. By this she means that if all basic steps are covered and done properly it

is much less likely that there will be legal problems to deal with later on. For some employers doing it right comes naturally but the many cases of industrial arbitration suggests that for many others there is a need for outside support and help. Use the Industry Associations to make sure your recruitment, induction and employment processes help you get the most out of your employees and protect you from avoidable problems.

Denita's Golden Rules of Industrial Relations

Recruit the right person for the job

*Ensure compliance with awards
(unless implementing formal agreements)*

*Sign all paperwork off immediately
(eg: letter of appointment)*

*Call your industry association for advice and information about any issue that may have legal ramifications
(eg: dismissal or changing employee status)*

*Seek assistance and advice before making major decisions, rather than after
(eg: guidelines and help in interpreting these)*

*Access the employment tools of your industry associations
(eg: checklists, award briefings)*

Go to HR / IR training sessions. These are "worthwhile attending and may prove invaluable in the long term"



Denita Harris (centre, with Tony Dwyer left and Gordon Griffin right, of Rural Skills Australia) gives some smart advice for finding the right worker and complying with regulations