



# Human Resource Considerations in the Pork Industry.

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Modern pork production is not only a pig business, it's also a people business. The identification, recruitment, training and retention of well-qualified employees are essential to the ability to produce safe, wholesome food. Similar to many other processes, pigs respond to management, and in order to consistently provide sound management at the farm level, well-trained employees are required.

The structure of the swine industry in the United States has continued on a long-term trend of consolidation resulting in fewer and larger farms. In 2020, the forty largest US pork producers owned two-thirds of the nation's sows. Due to this scale, producers need to identify, recruit and hire significant numbers of employees annually. Employees have with a wide range of career paths available to them in the modern US pork industry including everything from information technology, environmental management, accounting and finance, veterinary medicine, laboratory services and more. However, for the purpose of this article, I will focus on the human resource needs at the farm level where effective day-to-day pig management is essential.

In my experience in large production systems, farm-level employee turnover averages about 25% per year, and the majority of that turnover occurs within the first 30-45 days of employment. In order to reduce turnover, producers must have sound programs for employee recruitment, applicant evaluation, orientation and "on-boarding."

Working with pigs can be incredibly rewarding and yet at the same time be challenging for employee recruitment. Be certain that potential employees clearly understand what

the job requirements and working conditions are. Because hog farms are located in rural areas where there are fewer people, there is naturally a smaller pool of potential applicants to begin with. Those that are interested in working with pigs may have longer commutes to get to the farms. Biosecurity requirements such as showering into farms for work is off-putting to some people. Pig care is a seven day a week job, so work schedules, especially on sow farms, usually require some weekend work. These and other challenges need to be considered when we think about staffing plans, work schedules, compensation and benefits.

Once employees have been hired and successfully "on boarded," it is critical to have effective training and development programs in place. Because less than

one percent of the US population works in agriculture and even fewer have ever worked in pig production, most new employees will not have pig management experience. People want to be successful so that their work will be rewarding and offer career development opportunities. Farms should either develop their own detailed standard operation procedures and plan to train their own employees or access professional services for process standardization and employee training.

Because the farm operations are larger today, its is highly likely that employees will transfer or move between farms as they advance through their careers; therefore, it is critical to have consistent operation protocols at all locations.

Another critically important component for employee retention is effective management and supervision at all levels but especially at the farm level. Remember that people who are good at working with and managing pigs are not necessarily good at managing people. Swine producers must have a well-defined strategy and programs for manager training and development. Some of the skills that managers need to be successful include creating accountability, conflict resolution and effective delegation. In addition, managers must be aware of and maintain compliance with workplace requirements to support worker safety, equality, inclusion and harassment prevention. Also, it is important for managers and supervisors to have a structure process for providing employees routine feedback regarding work performance and expectations. Effective communication is essential in the workplace. Helping your employees know what is going well and what needs to be improved will help them be more successful, and grow in their job responsibilities.

There are many requirements of a well functioning human resource capability required for todays pork industry. Pork is a people business and in order to be successful, pork producers must have sound processes for recruitment and to provide a work environment that supports learning and career growth. This will result in better employee retention, improved management, and ultimately better pig performance.