

Strategies for supporting trainees

It is important to remember that most trainees are new to the industry, and in fact are probably new to any sort of job or working environment. It would be a mistake to assume that they have the same work habits, expectations, and knowledge, and capabilities as the rest of your workforce. Often they are young, and part of a completely different generation to managers, supervisors and other more experienced employees.

Therefore, how well a company takes the above factors into account will impact upon how successful trainees' training and working experiences are, how well your organisation retains trainees, and also the productivity of the workforce.

From surveys of meat industry trainees it was found that many trainees felt that they were expected to do too much in too short a space of time, and felt that they hadn't been given much time to adjust to their new role. Trainees also felt that other workers were not supportive, and were even intimidating at times. Both of these issues can be somewhat attributed to the pressures of high levels of industry turnover and industry-wide recruitment problems, which means that most companies are short-staffed and under enormous pressure to maintain production levels. Often trainees are expected to keep up with normal production speeds with little or no induction training, and understandably feel overwhelmed. This issue is a major contributor to trainees leaving the organisation and the industry before their contract of training is finalised.

Some strategies for trainers and training managers to provide more support to and for trainees might include the following.

- Make sure trainers and training managers know each trainee by name and do their best to make the trainee feel like an important part of the organisation.
- Give trainees an overview of the industry and what their role is within the company. Let them see the 'bigger picture'.
- Explain why something needs to be done (e.g. boots need to be washed to avoid contamination of product, because the consequences of this are...). This is particularly important for younger trainees, who will often be more inclined to follow instructions more closely if they know why they are doing something. Younger trainees usually don't respond well to being told they must do something "Because I said so" or "Because you just have to".
- Monitor new trainees for problems such as fatigue, muscle soreness, strains. If you can catch the signs early of any of these occurring and move them to another job or allow them to take a break the company increases its chances of that trainees coming back to work the next day. One good idea is to provide trainees with a 'stress ball', which may have a positive impact on strains in the hand and wrist area. These are relatively inexpensive and easy to obtain, and can even be printed with company logos. Besides easing aches and strains it shows the company genuinely cares about trainees' welfare and trainees will respond positively.

- Give trainees a workplace buddy, preferably an employee who has been there a long time and has completed a traineeship themselves. The buddy can then help trainees to adjust to their role and show them where lockers and lunch rooms are, and can also answer basic questions trainees might have about their training.
- Provide trainees with at least one day of dedicated induction training, and have a company policy in place that allows trainees to complete their induction before moving into production areas. If this training is conducted in groups, trainees are able to bond with fellow new employees and will know someone when they begin work.
- Be honest about career pathways in the organisation. Don't promise trainees things the company can't deliver, and try to make career progression based on performance, or factors that are within the trainees' control rather than personal factors. Conversely, if there are plenty of opportunities to progress within the company, let trainees know about it and keep reminding them. Often the first few months of a new job are so overwhelming any career information you provide initially will soon be forgotten or pushed to the back of the trainees' minds. It is a good idea to revisit some of the initial information trainees would have received on their first day in a later training session.
- Make sure trainers and training managers are approachable and respectful of trainees at all times. They should be available to answer any questions and should encourage trainees to ask questions.
- Make sure supervisors and leading hands know who trainees are (the company may even have different coloured hats for trainees to help supervisors identify them). Encourage supervisors to keep a closer eye on the trainees, and ask that they ensure trainees feel welcome and are not bullied or intimidated.
- Make sure other employees don't undermine company attempts to make trainees feel welcome. Often other workers may resent new employees who do not keep up with their jobs as well as more established workers. Make it clear that the company will not tolerate any forms of bullying or intimidation. Remind employees that they were new once too and they didn't do their jobs as quickly or as competently as they do now. The company should have disciplinary procedures in place for any form of workplace bullying or harassment and should make sure that company managers and supervisors enforce these procedures if other employees are making bullying or harassing trainees.

It is important to implement strategies and policies such as those outlined above early in the traineeship. Research indicates that trainees are most likely to leave within the first three months of a traineeship, so this is a critical time for the company to make a good impression on new employees and provide them with the necessary support and guidance.