



Rob and Clare Poole

Role:	Farm Owners
Passionate about:	Open and honest communication, clear procedures and expectations, and up skilling of staff
Location:	Opunake, Taranaki

Farm Information

Farm size:	259 Ha over 2 farms (effective 250 Ha)
Herd numbers & breeds:	1040 Friesian
Feed system:	System 5 on one farm and system 4 on other. Feedpads on both.
Dairy Shed:	60 bail rotary and 22 aside herringbone

Staff Information

Full time:	6 employees
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A pathway to smoother employment

For Taranaki farmer Rob Poole, laying out clear procedures and systems when employing staff helps everyone understand what is expected of them – right from the start.

Rob and wife Clare own two high input dairy farms near Opunake within 2km of each other. The 150ha farm runs 650 cows, and the 100ha farm milks 390, with six staff employed across the two businesses.

Rob believes he never had “any more than the usual” issues with employing and keeping staff, but several years ago he decided to formalise his employment procedures to provide a smoother transition between staff changes.

“We also realised that if we wanted to step back from the coal face we had to be more organised in how we recruited and employed staff across the two farms,” he says.

He also felt that HR management was just as important as pasture management to get the best out of the farm businesses.

He employed the services of long-time Tauranga based farm consultant, Kerry Ryan, to formalise employment procedures, reviews and job descriptions.

“Kerry bought a lot of experience in dealing with farm staff and together we put in a lot of effort to lift our processes over the rather ad hoc approach we had before.”

As simple as it may sound, crafting clear, concise job descriptions bought up-front benefits when

employing the right staff. It has also aided staff progression through the farm businesses.

The upfront benefit has been at the interview phase of the employment process.

“Once I get to know what they are about, if they like the sound of the position I give them a copy of the job description, and tell them to go and think about it. They can consider that and then let us know.”

“That description sets out our expectations as employers and lets the potential employee gauge whether the job meets their expectations regarding skill level and career goals.”

“We have had the odd ones who looked at it and felt they were a bit over or under qualified, but being up front they find that out well before committing. It saves a lot of grief on both sides.”

A broader benefit of having good job descriptions is to provide the existing staff members with a window into other positions within the farm businesses, and a chance to decide if they might be ready to step up into another role.

“There are no secrets, it is all there for them to consider, should the opportunities come up.”

Once employed, staff have regular performance reviews to ensure the expectations of both parties are being met.

This takes place twice a year, at the end of October and in April. A one-on-one process involves the staff member filling in a self-scoring sheet on different aspects of the job, marking themselves out of 10.

For a herd manager this may include ratings on pasture management or animal health, while a farm assistant may grade themselves for dairy hygiene or machinery capability.

“Usually staff know what they are good at, and what they need to improve on. What is more important is the conversation the scoring creates, about how to improve on certain areas, and recognition for the areas they are doing well in.”

He says the reviews provide a valuable means to decide on an employee’s future within the business. Whatever the outcome of the review, they work together to achieve a constructive and reasoned way forward.

Rob has tweaked and adapted some of the advice Kerry offered earlier. His “lumpy roster” system for leave is one example.

The “lumps” come from the irregular blend of time on and off that reflects the seasonal demands of the farms and his employees’ own desired days off.

“Rather than staff feeling they have to take a rostered or forced day off we write the roster well in advance with all staff party to it so there are no surprises and no changes unless everyone is happy to

What can I do?

Here are some things you can do to deal with staffing challenges:

- Write clear, plain language job descriptions for all staff positions and give potential staff an opportunity to look at them before being appointed. Get some help to write them, if necessary. Job descriptions will help with recruitment, staff development and staff progression.
- Have regular performance reviews with each staff member and use them as an opportunity to recognise achievements as well as areas for improvement.
- Work with your staff to develop rosters that will meet everyone’s needs. This will increase staff commitment to your systems.

change.” It lets people organise their own time so much better.

Up- skilling through farm courses is also encouraged, with staff attending Agriculture ITO courses on their day off.

“It is up to them whether they go or not – they have to take ownership of it. I pay them on their achievements, and if they get the credits I pay for them achieving them.”

Rob accepts it is impossible to keep good staff forever, and having clear employment processes in place makes any transition easier for the business to handle.

“Having Kerry’s help in putting a system in place has improved that. However, making a commitment to stick to those processes is important too. You have to be committed and do what you say you will do. It is far better to under promise and over deliver, rather than the other way around.”

The staff perspective:

Clear communication around required tasks, performance and expectations has been a key to the success herd manager Eli Vollebregt has enjoyed during his three years working for Rob and Clare Poole.

“I think Rob’s communication skills are hard to beat. He is very clear and concise, and this is backed up by having very good procedures around all the jobs we are required to do on the farm,” he says. Key task areas like effluent management, feeding out, and milking procedures are all clearly up on the wall in the farm dairy for all to see.

“What it means is if we have to correct something, like say the dairy is not as clean as it could be, then we have the procedures there to do it. There is no excuse for not knowing.”

With clear procedures comes the ability for staff to carry greater responsibility for their respective areas, and there is more pride in the part they play in keeping the high input operation running smoothly.

Eli says the comprehensive job descriptions Rob provided at his first interview three years ago included gradients on responsibilities, from “full control” through to “under instruction”.

“It was reassuring to be able to go through the responsibilities you had at that point. To be honest, at first I said to Rob I did not know if I had all those skills, but he was confident in me being straight up with him.”

Eli also admits looking forward to the review process twice a year for the feedback he needs to advance.

“When it comes to scoring myself I usually find I have given myself a lower score than Rob gives me. It is also an excellent opportunity just to sit down and discuss where things are going in a relaxed environment.”

The mentoring and encouragement Rob has shown Eli has inspired him to think about where he can go with dairying, combining his passion for youth work with a love of farming. The young manager is taking some time out from dairying to return to his home town of Masterton and reside at Rathkeale College as a youth worker.

“My longer term aim is to have my own farm where young guys can work and get an idea about what dairying is about. Meantime Rob has offered me a job back here once the youth work is done, and that is a real compliment.”