Local talent shines

While increasing numbers of farmers turn to the international market to solve staffing problems, large-scale Southland manager, John White, determinedly sticks to employing Kiwis.

“I’ve got a passion for training Kiwi staff,” John says. “I think a lot of farmers are recruiting and developing international guys to a high standard, and that’s fine and good for their business, and gives them some stability, because those guys have got a real desire to come out and be in New Zealand, but at the same time the Kiwis are missing out, basically because of having a lack of drive really.”

Originally from the Waikato, John is responsible for 4800 cows on four corporate farms south of Mossburn – two herds of 1500 cows milked through two 70 bale rotary sheds, 1200 cows through a 50 bale rotary and 600 cows through a 30 aside herringbone.

About 25 staff are employed, rising to 30 in spring. “Obviously there are some retention issues as happens on these big units, but I think it’s more because I tend to employ young Kiwi staff, as I want to give them a chance.”

John enjoys giving young people an opportunity and so most of his staff are aged between 17 and 25.

Some young staff are referred by WINZ. “We bring them on-farm here and give them a trial and sometimes an offer of employment at the end. Our success rate’s probably round 20 per cent with those people.

“The other group of trial staff that we get is through Southern Group Training which is a farm training school in Winton. They’re basically young school dropouts aged 14-16 and trying to get started on the farm somewhere.
While there are plenty who don’t stick with dairy farming, there are enough successes to convince John to stick with Kiwi staff.

“They’ve just inherently got to want to work – if they want to succeed and really strive to, they will! Everyone has got equal opportunities on this farm. Anyone who turns up at a junior level has got as much chance of making it to farm manager as anyone else on the farm – it’s just how hard you want to work.”

For staff who “have it in them”, who are prepared to milk cows to get ahead, John offers training to help motivation.

“It seems every week there’s someone going to training, whether that’s AgITO doing level 3 or 4 or maybe it’s milk quality, effluent management or other courses they are interested in. We have a really big push for that at the beginning of the season and then I try to tidy all the other people who are keen after calving.”

“You can sort of tell who you’re going to get the most value out of. We do training courses as well with Farmsafe around motorbikes and tractors. Ant Sutherland from Farmsafe is on-farm monthly.”

It’s important, John says, to make even the most junior staff recognise the importance of their role. “While cupping cows might be hard, monotonous work, it’s one of the most important jobs on the farm – effectively they’re putting the money in the vat.”

“We do that at the weekly farm meeting. We bring up issues and talk through these things – we talk about somatic cell count, about milking cows out properly, about reducing penicillin cows and why it matters – there’s a lot of information being shared.”

While turnover, or ‘filtering’, of junior staff can be high, John says he’s built a good team of senior staff in his four years in Southland. “I didn’t want to have to go out in February and March every year and replace a whole lot of people – I wanted to be able to build someone at herd manager level who was ready to go into that farm manager’s role if it arises.

“We’ve achieved that year on year and it has worked but it is harder to retain staff at the lower levels – not everyone can or has the ability to progress.”

Among his successes is one young employee who rose from farm assistant to farm manager in the space of 18 months. “There’s no quicker progress in the industry than that – if they want to do it they’ll do it.”

“The successes are the only thing that keeps you going; otherwise you’d just put it in the too hard basket and not even bother. We’re willing to give people a chance – I’ve always been that way. You turn up and start at the bottom and give it a go. I’m happy to see people succeed.”

What can I do?

Here are some things you can do if you want to develop and keep good staff:

- Try different ways of recruiting staff, such as trialling people from WINZ or farm training schools. If you offer them the right support you might be surprised by how well they work out.
- One of the best ways to motivate any staff is to offer training, as long as it’s the right training at the right time. After the training, check to see how it went, what they learnt, what they will apply on the job and what else they might need.
- Never stop reminding staff how important their job is, and how each task contributes to the success of the business. It’s a great motivator.
The staff perspective

Scott Richmond is one of John White’s success stories, rising from unskilled dairy assistant to farm manager over seven years.

But when Scott started on a dairy farm as a 17-year-old, he wasn’t sure he’d made the right career choice. “I had a question mark on what I wanted to do and I flicked across to engineering in town. I did three months as an apprentice-type thing and then turned around and said I want my job back on the farm.

“Basically, I’ve never looked back – you get some sort of satisfaction out of it, you can actually see your achievements,” Scott says.

John White met Scott when he was still a junior on a farm being converted from forestry in Lichfield, Waikato. “About half way through the year I had a gap on one farm, so we brought Scotty over from his farm assistant role into basically a farm management role.”

“He saw out the season doing a lot of problem solving and then came down south to manage one of the farms. Scotty’s a definite success story.”

On big farms, a smooth running, harmonious team is one of the secrets to success and, as he’s risen through the ranks, Scott has seen the value of employing team players.

“If someone doesn’t fit in the team and they don’t live up to what their reference says or what they say they’re capable of doing, it becomes a disaster anyway, so sometimes the risk is no different getting someone at 16 who’s never milked cows. We’ve seen that with a few younger guys who’ve never milked cows but would make pretty good farm managers if they kept with it.”

He’s one of those who’ve realised the opportunities on offer. His boss believes in giving anyone a chance but after that, it’s up to them.

“Some people will look at it and say, ‘I’ve got to milk cows’, whereas some people will go, ‘I’ve only got to milk cows for a year, do a bit of training and then step up’,” says Scott.

The trick is finding people “who’ve got it in them” and giving them opportunities. Then good people might look for you.