

FARMING NEEDS 'THE BRIGHTEST AND THE BEST'

One of the joys of my 25 years as a consultant has been seeing new people come into the profession and progress their careers.

There is, quite rightly, much talk in the farming industry about how we should do more collectively to promote careers in agriculture. It's important that we clearly communicate the advantages of working in this sector to young people, both from farming and non-farming backgrounds. But too much emphasis is sometimes put on the goal of owning or renting a farm, overlooking opportunities in the ancillary sectors.

There is a plethora of such roles available – everything from environmental adviser to land agent – which would appeal to those seeking exciting, enjoyable careers.

I always tell people that as a farm business consultant you get to work with fascinating people. Farming is, in some ways, slow moving because it's seasonal, but in other ways it's incredibly fast-paced because the industry is populated by innovators and entrepreneurs. They are, by definition, interesting people to work with.

You also get to help shape their businesses and can have a really positive effect on the landscape around you; I'm now seeing trees I planted 25 years ago become mature woods, something which is hugely fulfilling.

We have positively to 'sell' the attributes of such jobs to the next generation. While there are 'lifestyle' benefits, and working in the countryside is undoubtedly a vocation, we also need to pay competitive salaries and offer clear career progression if we're to attract the most talented people. It's a mistake to expect the way of life to, in itself, persuade the brightest school, college and university leavers to choose our industry.

The reality is, if you don't offer competitive salaries, you won't get the right applicants. We're in a horrible inflationary period. Diesel, for example, has rocketed in price compared with a few months ago, and this presents huge challenges for employers, but we can't expect employees to work



for less than they deserve.

When you look at a business's costs, staff can often account for 30% or more of the overall overhead. This reinforces how important it is to make the correct level of investment in it, rather than seeking to make false economies.

Perhaps we should change how we present vacancies? There are some great packages on offer, but this isn't always apparent when they're advertised because of the way the accommodation element is included.

When I see, for example, a farm manager vacancy advertised for '£30k plus cottage', I wonder if a better way to put it might be '£55k (made up of salary of £30k plus accommodation).' In total, the remuneration represents a great package and is commensurate with other industries.

That said, I always advise employers struggling to fill vacancies to resist the temptation to hire someone who isn't quite right for the role, even if it can feel expedient to do so.

In consultancy, for example, we only hire people with enquiring minds who are always asking questions and prepared to challenge the status

quo. Ultimately, this is a people business, so those working in it have to be good with all sorts of people. Consultants need to be good listeners, too, able to hear what's being said – and sometimes what's not being said!

We look for people who are bright, interested and interesting. I don't want someone who has just graduated from university with a first-class degree and hasn't done anything else. Work ethic is important, as well, and we expect hard work, but we're happy to reward it.

The new generation has a shift in mindset. I was involved recently in recruiting a gamekeeper – and it was refreshing to see how they view themselves as stewards of the countryside, as well as keepers of game.

In the past few years, I've seen some really capable new entrants come into our industry. Whether it's young farmers taking over from their parents, farmworkers, those going through a farming company's management scheme, agronomists or the graduate surveyors we've taken on at CLM, the land-based industries offer great opportunities for smart, ambitious people.

Let's all carry on spreading the word far and wide that agriculture, in the widest possible definition of the word, is a great place to work.

At this time of great change in farming, now more than ever we need the brightest young minds to choose the countryside as the place to carve out a career.



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