

Experts say food industry must adapt to labor shortages

By Mateusz Perkowski

Capital Press

The worker shortage isn't a temporary trend that farmers and food processors can hope will soon blow over, experts say.

As insufficient labor plagues the agriculture and food industries, employers must persistently compete for workers while investing in automation, according to experts at Food Northwest's recent annual processing and packaging expo in Portland.

"This is the new normal. Things will not go back to how they were before," said Osvaldo Granillo, sales director with Redzone Production Systems, which helps companies with worker productivity.

Retaining employees is key — apart from the expense of recruiting and training workers, companies face an "opportunity cost" when they can't fill orders due to an insufficient workforce, he said.

Employee retention doesn't just boil down to spending more on wages, especially with the new generation of workers, Granillo said.

A survey of young workers found that pay rates are 14th on their list of concerns, while enjoying their job is the top consideration, he said.

"Employees are becoming the new customers. We have to make them happy," said Steve Childs, a production manager for Chaucer Foods in Forest Grove. "Employees aren't something you do once and then put on a shelf."

Roughly 70 million workers from the baby boomer generation are projected to retire during a time period when only 40 million new workers will enter the workforce, said Brian LaPlante, district account manager with FANUC America Corp., a robotics company.

Retirements have increased in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, accelerating changes in the workforce that were already underway, LaPlante said.

"COVID has done automation a favor," he said. "The pandemic is continuing to influence the reluctance to return to work. People don't want to come back."

Robots have a history in food processing that dates back to the 1980s, when they started stacking boxes on pallets, LaPlante said. Since then, the machines have been moving "upstream" to interact directly with food.

"They are cleanable. They keep things from coming into them and keep things from coming out of them," he said.

Some robots can now learn how to accomplish tasks by being physically guided through them, rather than traditional programming, he said. "It streamlines the process, makes it a lot easier."

In agriculture, robots have already been deployed to harvest peppers, for example, but the technology is still at a relatively infantile stage, LaPlante said.

The challenge is creating software for robots to successfully interact with the environment, he said. "The robot can do what you tell it to do, but you need someone to tell it what to do."

Robotics offer a way to make up for the shortfall in workers and automate dull and unpleasant tasks, LaPlante said. Existing employees can then engage in more productive and rewarding duties.

"It's not our enemy. Automation is our friend," he said. "It's more of a tool to use than a threat to people's jobs."

Workplace culture is a crucial consideration for employers who are competing against other companies whose workers perform similar tasks, said Matt Crabtree, sales director with Redzone.

Given a choice between filling boxes with products or peeling onions, for example, a worker may choose the company "where people want to go and spend their time," he said.

"Retention is the cheapest thing you can do to maintain productivity," Crabtree said.

It's worth spending the time to continuously educate and train employees, focusing on communication and soliciting feedback on work processes, said John Damon, workforce development manager for Food Northwest, a food industry group.

Workers are less likely to jump ship if they see a future at the company, he said. "In this environment, you've got to keep engaging them and make

them feel important. If they feel like family, they will stay."

Bright employees can act out and become smart alecks when they're bored, so it helps to provide them with a purpose and opportunities for advancement, Damon said. "They see a career path where they didn't see one."

Promoting people from within the company ensures that employees in leadership roles know "every crack and cranny" of the operation, said Debbie Radie, vice president of operations at Boardman Foods in Boardman.

"My top mechanic today started on my trim line," Radie said.

Boardman Foods has a generous paid time-off policy and started an all-day child daycare program to retain female employees who'd otherwise be compelled to stay home during the pandemic, she said.

"We find creative ways for people to have that work-life balance, even on the work floor trimming onions," Radie said.

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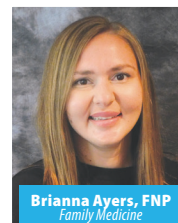


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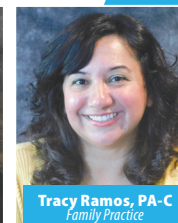
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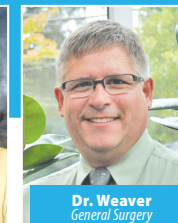
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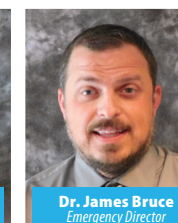
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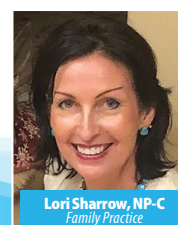


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