

Farmers – help us to help you

The farming industry is struggling to find enough new entrants – but there's more it could be doing to help itself, argues Hampshire policeman and would-be arable farm worker, **Andy Faulkner**

To Britain's farmers I say: "Help". You want skilled and motivated staff. Well, I want to be one of those people.

However, for an industry that gambles with the weather on a daily basis, you seem very risk-averse when it comes to employing people.

Look at the jobs advertised in *Farmers Weekly* every week. "Fully experienced worker wanted," many proclaim. That says it all. Very few are willing to bring on less experienced staff, it seems, of any age.

I understand the reasons why – business viability – but surely if this isn't built into your plans soon, you'll be turning away the very people you need to recruit into your industry to keep it viable.

With future forecasts predicting a significant shortfall in skilled workers, why isn't farming doing more to bring on inexperienced workers?

I am a late entrant to agriculture. I am not a farmer's son and haven't gone to agricultural college, but come from a very varied and responsibility-packed police background. I like to think I could bring life experience and other attributes.

I'm working in one career (the police force), simultaneously hoping to begin another (farming).

*** Farmers are reluctant to lose time teaching "newbies". Profit margins are slim and equipment expensive and easily damaged**

Andy Faulkner



Andy Faulkner wants to combine his career as a policeman with one in agriculture, but has found it difficult.

Friends with a BSc in Agriculture tell me they have learned more on a farm in a year than they did doing three years at university. That has given me some hope.

Agriculture as a career means working long, anti-social hours. The role is a lonely one and the pay comparatively poor as an hourly rate.

Of course there are numerous benefits, but youngsters today want much more for doing a lot less – so it's not surprising many are turning their back on it as a prospective career.

Starting out about two years ago, I wrote to several farms asking for work. My approach was that I would help for free in return for training.

I offered to work then as I offer now, on my three rest days a week, which I get from working condensed hours, and all my annual leave throughout the year, taking the bulk of my leave at harvest.

A large, forward-thinking estate in Wiltshire kindly supported me initially in this ambition. They put me through my pesticides, slug pellet and spraying courses for the trailed and self-propelled sprayers. I completed my rough terrain forklift and ATV quad tickets and then also finished my chainsaw courses. I am very grateful to them for the chance to gain these so early on.

With my own heavy goods licence for artics, operator transport

manager qualifications, full hazardous chemicals licence for packages and tankers of all groups and a Hiab ticket, I would, in theory, seem to be a good candidate for employment on paper.

The truth is, though, the experience I've gained has been mostly limited to grain carting and a bit of rolling. I'm (quite rightly) the gopher, learning my trade from the bottom up, running the grain drier, loading in and out and running stuff here and there to ensure a smooth operation, plus helping the other workers with various machinery maintenance tasks.

As I say, I have been very grateful for this opportunity, but it seems now my development has stalled and I've reached an impasse.

Farmers are reluctant to lose time teaching "newbies". Profit margins are slim, equipment expensive and easily damaged. With tight timelines, any delays have significant knock-on effects. The kit is specialised and unique to individuals. On bigger farms workers have their own preferential operations and it's difficult to break through.

The difficulty then is how do you learn and develop? What is the answer?

Well, there is only one answer. They ought to be prepared to mentor and bring on lesser experienced staff, even if there's a

potential short-term sacrifice in efficiency.

What will happen if you don't? Well, people like me, who aren't used to failure and giving up, might very well do so.

My farming aspirations hang in the balance presently. After months of looking, I have just found a sympathetic farm locally, willing to bring me on, so hopefully this will benefit both of us.

It's been a close call. I was increasingly coming to the conclusion that, if I didn't get that lucky break and find the help I need on possibly a smaller farm, I'd have to walk away and try something different.

Other people won't get lucky. Other people will walk away before they find someone to work for. Other people – potentially good people – will be lost to farming.

The industry needs to make more of an effort to assist newbies – and it needs to do it quickly.

WRITE TO REPLY

*** Feel strongly about this issue?**

There are lots of ways we can help you share your opinions

Post Letters Section, *Farmers Weekly*, Quadrant House, The Quadrant, Sutton, Surrey SM2 5AS

Email fwfarmlife@rbi.co.uk

Online www.fwi.co.uk/forums