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Deadline for copy is the Monday before publication although we need advance notice of at least three weeks. The articles should be no more than 900 words and appropriate to our editorial style - ie not aggressively promotional! Space is provided for logos and contact details.

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Staff – the big issue!

How BPEX is acting to enhance the role of the skilled worker - and assess levels of job satisfaction on the pig unit

Any business - and that includes pig production - is only as good as its staff, so attracting and retaining the best is vital.

That concept was explored at the BPEX Knowledge Transfer event where one presentation by Danish producer Asger Krogsgaard was called 'Why did my last good member of staff leave?' It showed the excellent working conditions for staff on the Krogsgaard family pig unit. It was no surprise to learn that the staff did not leave the unit to join another employer, but to set up units of their own! But just what motivates our labour force to come to work every morning and how do we get the best out of them?

BPEX is taking a look at the whole area, firstly through a BPEX Innovation Fund project which looked at how labour use might be measured. This was based on a system developed by Delta-innovations, to help bring down costs in the dairy industry.

Detailed analysis

The system, known as 'work-metrics', provides a detailed analysis of labour use and labour efficiency on farms. It analyses efficiencies at task-level and it standardises results according to common outputs - for example piglets weaned from the breeder herd and kilos of liveweight gain from the finishing herd. Analysis includes individual staff-costs, so it allows an accurate picture to be built of the staff-costs of production for each activity on the farm. This allows the user to focus on those tasks where savings might most easily be made.

From the original pilot project it was clear that there are huge differences in labour costs for the same work on different units, especially when considering feeding, farrowing, cleaning and fertility tasks.

The next stage was a successful application for a second BPEX Innovation grant, with the objective of recruiting many more producers so the industry could build up a statistically valid database of labour use on different types and sizes of unit.

When taken together with the background performance data from each unit this will enable benchmarks to be set for routine tasks. This will help producers become more efficient by adopting processes that use labour more efficiently. Ultimately it will provide valuable information on labour costs and the labour savings that might be made through investing in machinery or new technology, and it should help producers to identify tasks that might usefully be contracted out.

The ultimate aim of the project is not to reduce the amount of labour on the unit, but to reduce the time spent on redundant tasks to enable skilled workers to spend more time looking after the pigs and so increasing the output of the unit.

The second project is being run alongside the work-metrics project, and is a questionnaire on working conditions. It is being managed by Dr Helen Edge and Professor Sandra Edwards from Newcastle University and it was developed under an EU Framework 6 project, Q Porkchains (www.q-porkchains.org).

Q Porkchains is a large research

Tribune **EXTRA**

programme encompassing 54 European partners and focusing on the sustainability of pig production across Europe. The questionnaire has a real value to the pig production sector in the UK. It is well documented that good quality stockpeople are becoming increasingly hard to find and therefore the retention of high quality staff must be a priority for most businesses. By piloting this questionnaire on UK pig farms this will allow the analysis of the key factors that lead to staff being satisfied with their jobs and gain an insight into their views on factors such as training, job security and career aspirations.

Questionnaire for all

The questionnaire will be completed by all levels of employees within the business to enable comparisons to be made between employees with different levels of responsibility, of different ages and at different stages in their career. All responses to the questionnaire will remain anonymous and publication of results will not allow any unit or group of individuals to be identified.

Participants in the BPEX work-metrics study will be encouraged to complete the working conditions questionnaire. This will enable conclusions to be drawn linking job satisfaction with the types of tasks/labour use profiles that are associated with employees who are more/less satisfied with their working conditions. In addition, responses to the questionnaire may also be used to identify how labour use on units may be organised to improve the job satisfaction and ultimately staff retention of all involved.

If you are interested in participating in either or both of these projects, please contact Angela Cliff, BPEX KT manager. Tel: 07967 788484

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To see the presentation by Asger

