

A SHIFT NEEDED TO IMPROVE WORKFORCE OUTCOMES



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PHOTO: The rise of automation on farm, supported by digital technologies, requires an expansion of skills for farm management and farm workers. (Stock image)

QUICK TAKE

- Strategic workforce development is going to become an integral part of agricultural businesses and growers can take steps to improve their ability to manage future workforce challenges.
- Successfully moving through digital transformation will require skilled people development and management of farm workers, and new strategies to engage the next generation.
- The article reports on a study by Central Queensland University, which has been identifying the key characteristics of successful workforce management on farms, as technology changes.

There has been a range of external factors that have currently led to regional workforce shortages across Australia, and these are affecting several industries, including agriculture.

LOW unemployment rates means that the agriculture industry is now faced with the cold, hard fact, that when people have employment choices, they are choosing to work elsewhere. Competition with other industries for workers is not going to go away. An ageing population means we can expect continued talent shortages.

Strategic workforce development is going to become an integral part of agricultural businesses and growers can take steps to improve their ability to manage future workforce challenges today. Our workplace cultures that support, develop and retain people become the authentic attraction stories we can use to recruit the people we need in the industry.

Central Queensland University has a CRDC-funded research project which is attempting to take the findings from the last 10 years of 'people' research, to co-design practical strategies, tools and structures that will support employers in agriculture to secure and develop the workforce they need for their businesses. This is called the SHIFT project.

The SHIFT project

The SHIFT project proposes that we consider shifting our mindsets, behaviours and cultures in our agricultural workplaces to ensure a capable, engaged and satisfied agricultural workforce and that businesses are 'future fit'. The evidence suggests many growers are fantastic employers, but remain keen to add to their toolbox when it comes to managing their staff. Along with supporting growers in their workforce management, the project also aims to give employees the awareness and skills for how to take a more active role in managing their own careers and development in agriculture.

SHIFT is an acronym for our five pillars that guide effective workforce development:

- Social Sustainability = Community connections
- Human Sustainability = Employee engagement and thriving at work
- Innovative Workplaces = Team learning for high performance
- Future Focus = Adaptability
- Transformative Leadership = Change management

What does digital agriculture mean for the workforce?

Change has always happened on farms, and we can continue to expect many changes to occur that will require the workforce to adapt in their roles. One of these is the rise of automation on farm, supported by digital technologies. From our past research we know there is appetite from growers to look to automated solutions for irrigation. Particularly to manage the risk associated with limiting production due to not getting enough willing and able people to operate siphons on farm.

In our interviews with cotton growers in New South Wales, we found that digital agriculture holds the promise of improving workplace cultures. This occurs through the removal of jobs that attract workers with purely financial motivations and keeping those who are personally interested in working on farm. However, it does bring some challenges. There is still a need for workers with the mechanical and practical on-farm technical skills and non-technical skills, that are essential for the ways our farms currently work.

During this time of transition to digital agriculture, we are not going to see a dramatic change of the skills required so much as an expansion of the skills required on farm, which will grow to include digital capabilities such as digital literacy, troubleshooting, and data collection and management.

Add to this that digital technology also can bring with it more transparency of workers tasks, e.g. growers can have increased oversight of worker locations and activities. For workers to accept these technologies they need to trust their employer to not micro-manage or enforce punitive consequences when performance issues arise. Consequences are needed for poor performance in a fair workplace but there is a difference between accountability and punishment. Additionally with the disappearance of the school holiday siphon irrigation job, there are less entry level jobs that expose young people to the farm workplace. Questions arise as to how to get the next generation to have experiences that can influence their decisions towards a career in agriculture.

Successfully moving through digital transformation will require skilled people development and management of farm workers, and new strategies to engage the next generation.

Leading workers into the future

Our research has been presented in the report 'Contextualising the Future of Work in the Cotton Industry'. The report identifies the principles of transformational leadership used by cotton grower Andrew Watson, of Kilmarnock, to bring his permanent workers along on the journey to adoption of new technology on farm. These include:

1. Communicating a shared vision to his team, and giving clear expectations around performance standards.
2. Talking the talk and walking the walk to ensure actions are consistent with the shared vision.
3. Seeking his team's feedback and encouraging them to ask questions and challenge assumptions.
4. Understanding individual strengths and needs of his team members, and adapting support for developing their expertise.

As part of our research, we interviewed Andrew about how he had managed the introduction of new technology to his workers, and how they adapted to it.

Andrew explained that his team has phones with apps to use the technologies. For example, the spray rig operators use apps on their phone to connect to weather stations on the property and use the information to guide when and where spraying operations can occur. This ensures that the workers actions are consistent with all guidelines and requirements for spraying.

An example of encouraging his team members to adapt in their roles, as described by Andrew, includes "the guy who's a trained mechanic was very interested in laterals and was happy to be the guy who learnt to run them and operate them in my absence."

Andrew has involved his workers in the discussion of selecting and using new technologies, so they have a shared vision for new operations. The workers have offered new suggestions and ways of applying the technologies, which have been adopted across the farm. Andrew describes this approach as getting “a bit more horsepower out of people, by giving them some incentive, some ideas and some excitement”. In response to some of the suggestions, Andrew has sent his staff off to Ag-Quip with a list of things they’ve got to try and find the answer to.

SHIFTing our workplace cultures is very much in the realm of making those 1% incremental gains in creating an inclusive, supportive workplace culture. Incremental gains can spiral and add up to make a significant impact. If we can do this industry wide, we can become an industry of choice for the next generation. 🌅

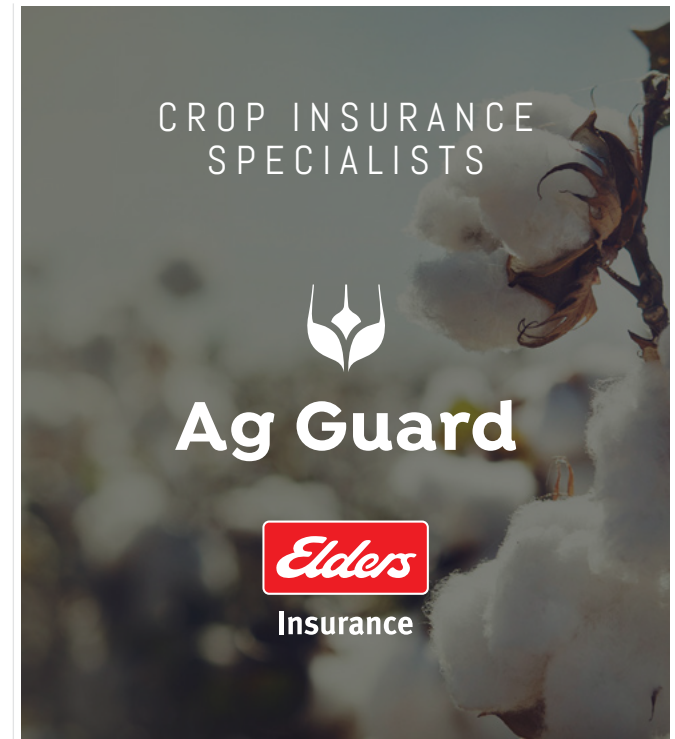
Further information

If you are interested in receiving updates on the project and opportunities to trial tools and ideas, please register here: <http://shiftproject.com.au/register-for-updates/>

If you’d like to read more on ‘Contextualising the Future of Work in the Australian Cotton Industry’, the full report is here, <https://tinyurl.com/2s4ewczc> and the case study of Kilmarnock Farm: Transformational Leadership Facilitating Change and Adaptation of the Workforce is on pg. 53 of the report.

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