

COVID-19

AND THE AGRICULTURAL WORKPLACE

by Erika Osmundson, AgCareers.com Director of Marketing & Communications

I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, but I'm tired of the "new normal"! There is very little normal about what has taken place due to the COVID-19 pandemic. From virtual learning and events to face masks and social distancing, this pandemic has thrown normal right out the window.

Now, not that it has been all bad. If we look for the good, we're bound to find some. AgCareers.com recently held our Ag & Food HR Roundtable, and yes, it was virtual this year! Throughout the sessions, which covered high interest issues in recruitment and retention within the industry, presenters shared many positives. Positives that shed light on why the agriculture and food industry is where you want to work, even during the unprecedented times of a pandemic!

THE COVID IMPACT ON THE AGRICULTURAL WORKFORCE

There has been and continues to be a talent gap between the number of jobs available within the agriculture and food industry and the number of students coming out of colleges and universities that can fill these roles.

Even with increased unemployment, the agriculture industry still has demand. For those that have technical skills or trade experience, the need is even greater.

The pandemic highlighted the industry's status of "essential." We need few other professions as much as the one that feeds, clothes and fuels the

world. In this time of uncertainty, we found the general public stopping and noting their food and where/how it is produced. Clearly, the pandemic shed light on some supply chain bottlenecks, but from an opportunistic perspective; sizable areas for growth and change.

EMPLOYER PREPAREDNESS

Agribusinesses held steady. According to a recent AgCareers.com poll conducted as the pandemic hit, 94% of participating agricultural employers felt the organization had an above-average plan in place to deal with COVID-19. Employees that responded ranked their employers high in this category as well (73%).

While other industries such as travel/leisure and retail services were taking tremendous hits to staff management, the agribusiness industry weathered the storm much better. Only 22% of participating employers in the above-mentioned poll stated that they needed to take action to manage their staff such as furloughs, layoffs, or reduction in hours.

We also saw recruitment and hiring maintain balanced levels. Seventy-six percent of employer respondents to a May poll said that they planned to continue with hiring as projected. Through the AgCareers.com network of clients we saw this trend play out. While we saw a slight dip of activity on the

AgCareers.com job board at the onset of the pandemic, employers quickly settled and actioned on plans to move forward. Realizing that quality talent was available, and the needs of the organizations and operations couldn't wait for the pandemic to pass.

INTERNSHIPS – WHAT WE LEARNED

While we know there were the unfortunate few who could not continue with their internship as planned, many agricultural employers were able to keep their programs going. From the poll, 59% of employers responding could proceed with their internship programs as planned this past summer. Another 10% had to make some alterations, like delaying start dates or reducing hours.

But one of the biggest changes was notably that many interns found their program to be virtual! There were skeptics all-around—students unsure if a virtual internship would be meaningful and employers wondering if they could trust students to take on the accountability of a virtual internship.

What did we learn? The worry was for not. The employers and students that AgCareers.com talked with disproved the skeptics. Students could get value out of a virtual internship. Employers saw student's step-up to the plate and prove they were up for the challenge.

We don't know yet what next summer will look like, but this summer has >>>

proven that companies and students can make virtual internships work. If we remain virtual next summer, expect to see even better virtual experiences.

STUDENT RECRUITMENT ON CAMPUS THIS FALL

At the Roundtable, several university career services professionals joined in a panel to discuss what they think student recruitment will look like on campus this fall and perhaps the remainder of the year. You guessed it, virtually!

For many companies that weren't on board with virtual or remote before the pandemic have learned that their businesses and employees can be just as successful, if not more in a remote setting. Organizations are finding cost savings in the forced lack of travel while maintaining targets. We'll see some of these virtual and remote aspects hold on even after the pandemic is gone.

Getting comfortable with virtual recruitment and a virtual workspace is one way to set yourself apart from your other candidate competition. Explore

virtual career fairs, virtual interviewing and virtual networking. Reach out to alumni through LinkedIn and engage in events through online portals. This is a bit of the new reality and showing you are an early adopter will take you far.

WHAT DOES GOING TO THE OFFICE LOOK LIKE THESE DAYS

We are talking about more than just being in a square building. It is what you'll encounter as you go to an office, whether an internship or new graduate opportunity. You may have heard of a shift in the employment market and that it is now an employer's market; meaning that employers have the upper hand because there are plenty of candidates on the market. Well, that isn't entirely true for the agriculture industry. Plus, this industry is humble and prides themselves on quality - that means for talent too.

You may have more competition through the recruitment process but demonstrate the key employability skills, like communication, reliability, work ethic,

and resiliency. Support those with your technical expertise. Your industry-specific expertise will get you in the door, but it is likely your employability skills that will win the interviewer over!

Let's just talk about resiliency briefly. As a student or young professional that has lived through the pandemic, if you've managed through these challenging times you are resilient. This is something that employers stereotypically feel that young professionals and students lack, but the pandemic has just opened your examples for interview questions on this topic wide open!

Agricultural employers, or at least the good ones, still focus on their employees and providing a culture that is safe, compassionate, and fun. Look for these things (or those things you are passionate about) in future employers. The pandemic has not created an employment crisis within the agriculture industry as of now. Don't panic and take the first job offer just because. Instead, take a job that you can see yourself enjoying and excelling in! **AG**



STANDING OUT IN A VIRTUAL INTERVIEW

Cynthia Cole, Recruitment Manager for De Lacy Executive Recruitment, shared some valuable tips on how students can stand out in a virtual interview.

- Be mindful of new processes—virtual is the new normal
- Dress appropriately
- Test technology—practice with a friend if possible
- Set the scene—avoid background noise and cluttered spaces
- Convey enthusiasm—let the employer know you are excited
- Address the pandemic—yes, you can ask about how their company has dealt
- Give a compliment—if you've experienced something good in their process, tell them

A video interview is still a great way for you to assess the company! Look for ways that the employer steps up in the virtual setting to help you recognize why you should work for their organization.