

Managing Labour Requirements in Nursery Stock

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INTRODUCTION

There is little doubt that the present difficulties associated with labour resources across the nursery stock industry are a major concern to nursery managers. They have in fact become a global problem and many nurseries now share similar concerns as much of the work remains labour intensive, so attracting considerable materials handling costs. Seasonal tasks such as potting, planting, order collation, and despatch are prime examples. Handling adds cost but adds nothing to profit. A further consideration is that the labour force now available to land-based industries, such as horticulture, has been in decline for some considerable time and there is more competition than ever before for good staff, particularly from the service industries.

Nurserymen now need to compete in an increasingly difficult and challenging global market which is frequently price sensitive. A declining labour force is one of several problems. Import competition remains fierce and to maintain profitability, disciplined cost control without compromising quality or service is necessary. It is a difficult balancing act for many businesses, particularly given the nature of the work, with labour resources frequently occupying a high proportion of the cost base.

PROMOTING HORTICULTURE AS A CAREER

The subject of labour resources embraces a number of issues including education and training. Clearly, there have been frustrations with the quality of graduates and new entrants and closer dialogue between the industry and educational bodies is very welcome. Some businesses have instigated their own in-house induction/training programmes in response to these difficulties. Budget cut-backs in education have also been a contributory factor, leading to a greater emphasis on numbers, rather than the quality, of graduates.

Linked with education are image, profile, and the need to promote horticulture more vigorously as a rewarding and sustainable career. Clearly, there is a need for the industry to raise and maintain its profile, particularly at grass roots level, in order to establish a larger, better quality labour pool from which it can recruit more readily. Currently, there is a dearth of skilled and middle management personnel which is frustrating to many businesses. It undermines their ability to compete within a highly challenging market.

A further issue is the changing skills mix now required. While traditional skills such as budding and grafting remain important, new skills embracing computer technology, sales and marketing, quality management, and customer service are required to serve an industry which is becoming increasingly sales driven.

Legislation embracing the EU Working Time Directive and minimum wage are also of concern as price sensitivity continues while costs spiral, so placing margins under even greater pressure. Current proposals for energy and pesticide taxes provide further worries and could place additional cost burdens on many businesses

so limiting employment prospects. Some businesses, however, are reducing pesticide inputs and costs by adopting a more integrated control strategy and there is increasing pressure from the market to do this.

STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

Looking to the future, there are no easy solutions to many of these difficulties but future strategies will need to focus on three key areas:

- 1) Maximising the available labour pool through improving the image of horticulture and so broadening its appeal.
- 2) Improving labour efficiency through work study to develop better handling and transport systems, linked to coordinated nursery layouts.
- 3) Reducing labour dependency by increased automation and mechanisation.

It is important for the industry to promote itself more dynamically as it has many strengths. It is highly innovative and expanding. Never before have so many plants been grown for the retail and environmental markets. Future growth will provide good opportunities for the right people but the strengths of the industry need to be highlighted to attract good quality recruits. The image of the industry on the continent remains attractive to many Europeans in the trade and the use of foreign labour in the U.K. is likely to increase.

Many nurseries based in continental Europe have invested in increased mechanisation and improved materials handling systems in order to improve labour efficiency and reduce employment costs. Mechanisation can also be used to remove much of the drudgery from nursery work so enhancing its appeal to new entrants. Some nurseries are investing in sophisticated gantry and monorail systems to ease and speed labour intensive tasks, such as order collation and setting down. Such equipment may also embrace irrigation and spray application to create integrated systems with the potential to link with water recycling. Information technology to ease and speed repetitive tasks such as stock control, administration, and record keeping is also becoming more commonplace. Internet trading is likely to expand during the next decade.

Production is likely to follow a more specialised approach in the future in response to market trends and to facilitate greater mechanisation. It will also become more polarised, with larger units servicing the big landscape schemes and multiple retailers using outsourced or contract-grown stock. These units are likely to invest in more integrated systems linking gantries, mobile benches, and potting rigs with better equipment for spray application and water recycling. Sales, marketing, and transport costs may become shared, with the possibility of nurseries combining to set up regionalised distribution and sales centres.

Integrated pest management and plant growth regulators may also provide scope to reduce labour. Forward planning of nursery layouts so they progress in a coordinated way, linked to suitable handling systems, will also be essential if nursery stock units are to remain progressive and competitive. Potting systems are becoming increasingly mobile and mechanised whilst lifting equipment in the field continues to develop.

CONCLUSION

It is unlikely that the industry will ever enjoy the same degree of access to the labour force it once did. However, future prospects are bright for those who are innovative, forward thinking, and well motivated. The emphasis towards environmental issues is likely to accelerate and the garden market seems set to expand as the media profile and popularity of gardening continues to rise. It is important to take advantage of this and promote the positive features of the industry. This, combined with improved levels of labour efficiency, automation, and mechanisation is the way ahead.

The Influence of Government on UK Nursery Stock Propagation and Production

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INTRODUCTION

The Government, through the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food (MAFF) has a beneficial interest in plant propagation and production and this can be illustrated with reference to two aspects of MAFF activity. First, there is the policy towards regulation of the sector and, secondly, its efforts through the research and development programme.

GOVERNMENT REGULATION

Much regulation is essential, for example to safeguard animal, public, or plant health or to protect the environment. Above all, Government priority through MAFF legislation is to safeguard the interests of consumers. Consumers need to have confidence in the products which growers place before them. Good regulation enhances consumers' confidence in growers' products and in the regulatory authority. That is the reason for the Pesticides Safety Directorate and for the Food Standards Agency which is shortly to be established.

Food Safety and Environmental Protection thus have priority under the MAFF regulatory programme. But the Ministry is nevertheless concerned to keep regulation to a minimum. The test for good regulation is that it should be transparent, properly targeted, proportionate to the problem, consistent in application, and those of us who make regulations should be fully accountable for them. Wherever possible, except in emergencies, the Ministry consults all those who would be affected by a new regulation and tries to let them know what its impact will be.

These arrangements apply where MAFF designs the policy and the legislation which implements it. It is not quite the same in Europe where the U.K. is one voice in 15. However, MAFF's representatives still seek to get the "better regulation" message across and, once regulations are agreed, the Ministry takes care not to implement beyond what is required. This is not always easy to do. Other member