GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

9/1/2018

Wrestling with the Labor Challenge

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Editor's note: We're pleased to welcome Heather to our team of regular contributors! We hope you enjoy reading her columns with a West Coast point-of-view.—JZ

I've been fortunate enough to have visited the Netherlands to see automated horticultural production in some of its more advanced capabilities. Pristine greenhouses the size of football fields dot the Dutch countryside manned by minimal crews wearing lab coats instead of muddy work boots. In the U.S., and especially on the West Coast, we live a different type of horticulture, with year-round outside production, a lot of dirt and large labor crews.

Our horticultural labor, like most of agriculture, has flowed up from Mexico and countries further south since WWII, when the United States requested agricultural labor aid. During this span from 1942 to 1964, Mexico supplied 4.5 million agricultural workers to the U.S. Many of these people stayed due to employment opportunities, which created the foundations of more widespread immigration, as relatives and friends sought to join their U.S. counterparts. For decades, the border wasn't strictly enforced, allowing workers to flow back and forth as work was available.

However, several events changed this dynamic in the 1990s with the creation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and stepped-up border enforcement. NAFTA has been blamed for causing a spike in illegal immigration when the U.S. flooded Mexico with cheaper, government subsidized corn, causing the collapse of the small village farmer. These farmers then sought jobs in the U.S. to feed their families. During this period, agriculture and horticulture could easily find the needed labor and skill sets to run our nurseries, as groups of people would come to our doorsteps looking for work. Those days of plentiful, skilled personnel showing up at our sites are over.

Along with tightening border security, the Great Recession of 2008 marked the end of our seemingly abundant labor pool, as construction and other man-powered jobs disappeared. Since 2005, the U.S. has seen a 66% reduction in Mexican immigration due to factors attributed to the Great Recession and border policies in a post 9/11 environment. In addition, Mexico has undergone demographic and economic changes that have shrunk the pool of potential immigrant labor. The diaspora of farm workers seeking work in cities has slowed greatly and birthrates are lower since the need for larger families has diminished with the loss of small farmers. Mexico has also strengthened its economy and now offers more opportunities within its borders.

What do these changes mean for U.S. horticulture, especially to growers on the West Coast? We can automate like the Dutch, become more competitive in hiring (like Google?) or do a blending of both. Since most growers cannot afford to build football field-size glass houses run by robots or pay like a tech company, our blending has to be

creative. Most of us are still trying to figure it out.

For many growers, our seasonal or contract labor comes from companies that broker personnel, making up to 50% to 60% of our labor force. This means that half or more of our labor isn't permanent and not as invested in our organizations as those who are company employees. Through contract labor, we gain the flexibility to have people as needed, but we lose the benefits of a well-trained crew, employees that work harder because they feel a part of something larger than the individual, and the development of a company's culture and mission—the mission being a company's philosophy and goal statement.

People have been studying worker efficiency since pre-industrial revolution, with findings showing a company's mission and culture are often as important as a paycheck. Knowing that, how do growers create a distinct culture and mission while constrained by our tightening labor pool, seasonality and other pressures? Does knowing and understanding how we got here—the here of wondering how to continue staffing our sites in this changed economy—help us steer our industry forward? What tools do we have available to develop people into productive employees?

As I wrestle with these questions, I cannot help but think about the people who make up our labor force, their hopes and dreams, and hope that we can find a way to tie these together with our purpose and missions. Even after almost 20 years in production, I still like to think that we growers already have a mission, which is to make the world a better, more beautiful place one plant or flower at a time. **GT**

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