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Project Insights Report

Development of a National Agriculture and Agri-Food Workforce Strategy



PARTNERS

Canadian Agriculture
Human Resources
Council (CAHRC)



LOCATIONS

Across Canada



INVESTMENT

\$1,654,470



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CONTRIBUTORS

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Executive Summary

This project set in motion a series of initiatives aimed to generate the necessary insights and evidence required to develop a national workforce strategy for the Canadian agriculture and agri-food sector. The main objective of the project and eventual workforce strategy is to address the persistent labour shortages in the agriculture and agri-food sector, which are hindering the sector's growth and sustainability and, in turn, negatively impacting the economic health and well-being of the country. Shortages in the sector are a consequence of several factors, including demographic shifts, rural depopulation and competitive alternative employment options.

The project sought to better understand the factors underpinning the persistence of labour shortages in the sector by gathering insights from industry stakeholders and revealing potential misconceptions among job seekers (notably those from underrepresented groups) about employment in the sector.

Several research studies were conducted to generate evidence on workforce development in the sector, including an assessment of agriculture's readiness for technological adoption and an evaluation of barriers related to infrastructure investment. Understanding this latter point is essential to promoting business growth and community development, particularly in rural areas where agricultural businesses face unique challenges. In parallel, project coordinators launched two key research streams to gather quantitative and qualitative insights from workers and employers. The first aimed to gather intelligence on worker perceptions of the sector and potential barriers to recruiting more talent to the agriculture and agri-food sector. The second, focused on employers, sought to determine current and future workforce challenges and what will be needed to retain and attract workers over the next 5–10 years.

The project revealed that both demand and supply measures are needed to enhance employee retention and address labour shortages effectively. On the supply side, the project revealed that among potential workers, misconceptions about pay, the nature of the work, and work-life balance persist, particularly among those unfamiliar with agriculture beyond farming. These barriers need to be mitigated to attract more workers to the sector. At the same time, findings from the demand (employer) side suggest that improvements in workplace culture are needed to improve retention. In particular, the project advocates for measures to support organizational investments in employee well-being and community engagement.

The strategic application of these workforce development practices could serve as a model for other sectors, which could enhance overall workforce stability and contribute to a more resilient economy.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1** Low awareness of agricultural careers outside of farming is contributing to outdated stereotypes about jobs in the sector, negatively influencing overall perceptions of the quality of work and dampening the overall attractiveness of the sector.
- 2** Higher-than-average turnover rates in the agricultural sector are primarily due to the jobs not meeting employee expectations regarding working conditions and salary.
- 3** Measures to improve retention and internal human resources practices (e.g., supporting financial security and work/life balance) are also needed if the sector is to meaningfully address labour shortages in a sustained manner.

The Issue

Canada's agriculture and agri-food sector, a vital component of the national economy, has been grappling with significant labour shortages that threaten its sustainability and growth. This sector, which plays a crucial role in feeding the nation and contributing to economic health, has faced persistent challenges in attracting and retaining a skilled workforce. The labour shortage in the sector is not a new phenomenon but has been exacerbated in recent years due to various factors, including demographic shifts, rural depopulation, and evolving job expectations influenced by broader economic and social trends. The ongoing labour shortages are impacting the operational capabilities of farms and food processing facilities and pose risks to food security and the economic stability of rural communities across Canada.

Historically, the agriculture and agri-food sector has relied heavily on domestic and temporary foreign workers to meet its labour demands. However, the sector has struggled with high turnover rates, particularly among entry-level positions, and filling skilled positions. These challenges are compounded by the seasonal nature of the work and the often-remote locations of agricultural operations, which limit the pools of job seekers. Additionally, the sector competes with other sectors, which makes it harder to attract young workers and new entrants to the labour market.

Efforts to address these labour shortages have included various initiatives to improve recruitment and retention strategies, enhance workplace conditions and increase the appeal of agriculture and agri-food jobs. These initiatives have had only varying degrees of success, underscoring the need for a comprehensive and coordinated approach to workforce development in the sector.



What We Investigated

The project was guided by several key research questions to address the challenges and opportunities within the Canadian agri-food sector, particularly focusing on workforce dynamics in primary agriculture and food and beverage manufacturing. The primary questions explored were as follows:

- What motivates individuals to work in this sector?
- What attracts individuals to specific operations?
- What potential improvements could employers make to enhance workplace culture and employee retention?

Key stakeholders included the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council (CAHRC), which led the project, and industry partners such as Food Processing Skills Canada, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, and Food and Beverage Canada.

To gather intelligence on current and future workforce challenges, with a focus on strategies to retain and attract workers over the next 5–10 years, researchers conducted qualitative research, which included 13 interviews and focus groups with 30 participants, and a quantitative survey that garnered 235 responses from various industry representatives. The qualitative interviews and focus groups collected detailed, narrative data from industry participants, while the quantitative survey provided statistical insights into human resources practices and employee turnover rates.

In addition, the project identified barriers to attracting non-traditional job seekers to agriculture. Researchers surveyed more than 2,000 Canadians aged 18–65 who are not retired or employed in the agriculture-related sector to investigate their perceptions of careers in the sector. The project also emphasized the importance of equity, diversity and inclusion in developing the workforce strategy, aiming to make the agriculture and agri-food sector more inclusive and appealing to a broader range of job seekers.

✔ What We're Learning

Turnover, recruitment of domestic employees and low community engagement are among employer-focused challenges

One of the key findings gathered from industry stakeholders was that employers experience high turnover rates: 58% of respondents reported being “concerned” or “very concerned” about employee turnover. Companies that hire Canadian employees report that they retain 50% of employees after their first month of employment and a 25% average turnover rate beyond the first month. Employers primarily attributed this turnover to the jobs not meeting employee expectations regarding working conditions, and competitive pay from other sectors. The data revealed a critical need for operations to enhance their workplace environments and employee engagement strategies to effectively retain their workforce.

The project also highlighted the difficulty in recruiting skilled and entry-level domestic employees, as 67% of employers reported significant challenges. This difficulty underscores the sector’s need to broaden recruitment strategies and improve value proposition to potential employees.

In fact, employers that have successfully attracted and retained workers have made intentional efforts to invest in creating a purposeful workplace culture. This includes extensive onboarding processes and regular employee check-ins, especially within the first month of employment. Additionally, employers who actively listened to their employees and made adjustments based on their input were more successful in creating a positive workplace culture and retaining their staff.

Finally, the project identified a gap in community engagement; only 10% of operations actively invest in community partnerships. This finding suggests a potential area for growth, as community involvement can significantly enhance an employer’s appeal to prospective and current employees by fostering a sense of belonging and corporate responsibility.

Worker-related challenges include lack of interest in and knowledge of the sector

Workers’ impressions of the sector were positive (76% very/somewhat positive), yet interest in learning more about career opportunities were relatively low. The majority (54%) of respondents were unable to identify a job in the agricultural sector besides “farmer.” This is concerning, as it points to a general lack of awareness of some of the higher skilled professions that offer competitive pay and benefits.

Nearly all Canadians rate financial security (94%) and work-life balance (92%) as being important career goals. Yet compared to other sectors, there may be an overarching belief that careers in agriculture do not offer strong pay or work-life balance. Indigenous Peoples and immigrants, particularly recent arrivals, show greater interest in agriculture careers. They are also more willing to consider career changes and relocation for better job opportunities.

The project findings suggest that communications or recruitment strategies, notably for certain underrepresented groups, would attract employees. Moreover, talent attraction could focus on promoting the types of highly specialized and in-demand skills that can be learned and expected to yield high-paying jobs in the agriculture sector. This would help to address misconceptions regarding employment opportunities in the sector.

★ Why It Matters

The findings from this comprehensive study on workplace practices and culture within Canada's agriculture and agri-food sector underscore the critical need for a workforce strategy to address labour shortages and enhance employee retention. These insights are particularly relevant for policymakers and industry leaders seeking to foster a more resilient and competitive agriculture and agri-food sector.

In fact, many sectors of the economy struggle to attract and retain skilled talent. This dampens not only the individual firm's prospects, but limits overall economic growth and prosperity, including for many underrepresented groups that are already disadvantaged within the labour market. The project underscored that policies encouraging and supporting organizational investments in employee well-being, inclusive practices and community engagement could help improve job satisfaction and lower turnover rates. (These represent valuable lessons for other sectors in the economy as well.)



State of Skills: Sustainable Jobs for Economic Growth

Green-related skills and knowledge are growing in significance and are becoming widespread across many sectors and occupations, requiring more workers to upskill by building upon their existing competencies.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

At the same time, outdated perceptions of the quality of work are holding back many job seekers from considering careers in sectors like agriculture that, in truth, feature many emerging opportunities. In fact, with the right skills interventions, many of the opportunities in these sectors could lead to well-paying jobs. Concerted efforts are needed to dispel myths and build awareness and interest in these careers by promoting higher-skilled opportunities that showcase potential career progression in these sectors.

▶ What's Next

The [workforce strategic plan](#) provides directions on how best to address workforce challenges in the sector. It articulates clear areas of action and identifies roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders to improve transparency and accountability. The strategy also provides instructive tools and resources that will support the implementation of the strategy. CAHRC is implementing the strategy with partners. It will focus on immigration and foreign workers; people and workplace culture; skill development; automation and technology; and perception and awareness of the sector's industries and careers.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

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