

Working and learning in the Australian meat processing industry

The meat-processing industry in Australia has undergone a series of profound changes over the last 20 years or so. These have included changes in supply chains, ownership structures, work organisation and labour supply. All have affected the nature of work and the formation and use of skills in the industry, resulting in a degree of skills atrophy. In response, the industry has recently developed a comprehensive training package and attempted to build a career path for some meat processors, two of the objectives being to reconnect work to a less task-oriented system and build skills development. Some employers have begun restructuring training and supervision, with the aim of providing a supportive workplace for workers and a better site for learning.

This overview describes research conducted by Kent Norton and Mike Rafferty of the Workplace Research Centre at the University of Sydney. It forms part of a three-year project on workforce development in industries which are characterised as low-skill entry points to the labour market.

What the research found

Meat processing, with its labour-intensive and sometimes dangerous work, is a tough industry. Changes over the last few decades mean that abattoirs now have very diverse workforces and a high turnover of workers. The industry is also exposed to both the volatilities of livestock supply and very intense pricing pressures from large domestic retail chains and overseas buyers.

These challenging conditions have affected training and workforce development in the industry. This overview, based on four case studies of red-meat-processing workplaces, presents some of the implications for skill formation and use. The enterprises in this study have found ways to adapt to an increasingly competitive business environment, where labour is difficult to recruit and retain.

A key finding of the research was the central role of appropriately trained and committed supervisory and training personnel at the site of production. While this does not change the strong task orientation of the work itself, which constrains the capacity for skills growth, it does point to a transformation in the way the industry is thinking about work, skill formation and training.

The case studies highlighted on the next two pages illustrate the benefits of training for supervisors and trainers, and how this can improve the workplace for other workers.

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RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Lessons from the case studies

Changing workplace conditions and developing the workforce: how good supervisors and trainers can make a difference

Supervisors and trainers play a key role in shaping workplace culture. The training of supervisors is an important factor in changing the way supervisors treat workers and, in turn, how co-workers treat each other.

Developing a better workplace culture and modelling good work practices

The meat-processing industry has developed training packages in response to the trend towards task-based work. The aim is to give the training more credibility and coherence. At the site level, where learning happens, trainers and supervisors play a key role in training and modelling work practices and appropriate behaviours.

The trainers and the supervisors are the best we've ever had ... smarter, equipped better, they do cultural diversity training, how to speak to people training, they learn the lot ... I think they're getting something out of it now ... I saw that as a huge change for the company, not like the old days ... 19 years ago, you'd be too scared to say anything to the supervisors.

If you haven't got patience it's no good being a trainer ... the trainer's job is more important than the supervisor's job. If we can't train them properly then the supervisors can't supervise them. The trainer's got the most important job up there ... Supervisor's got an important job too because they've got to keep checking the product. But people-wise you want them to get the skills to run your company. You need the right people with the right attitude doing the job.

We started off where we wanted to have a new culture in the industry, get away from the them and us that had been instilled in the industry by the slaughtermen, I'm a boner, I'm a slicer, you're just a labourer, we wanted to get away from all that and everybody treated as an equal ... we started a single shift first, and wanted to employ as many people who hadn't worked in a abattoir before so we taught them our way.

Tolerance of cultural diversity amongst workers

Typically, meat-processing workplaces now employ people from many ethnic groups. With a varied and ever-changing pool of workers, supervisors and trainers need strong skills in cultural diversity and sensitivity.

You've got to remember every person is different and you might have one sentence but you've got ten people and you might have to tell that sentence ten different ways to get it across. We've got a diverse culture out here, people from all walks of life and all parts of the world, and some don't understand as easily as others, you've got to explain it to them, and some learn more hands on than from the theory ... If you can relate to something they've done and start talking about that and get them to work they feel more at ease and if you can come across that way ... you've got to get them at ease then they'll do a good job for you.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Non-traditional job design initiatives

In some places, changes to existing shift systems had been made to increase labour supply and accommodate people's work preferences. Fletcher International Dubbo, for example, employs the so-called mums' shift—women who work across the morning and afternoon shift. High school and university students, who work part of the afternoon shift, are also taken on.

We've got all these kids coming Friday night ... they come of a night and we get all the jobs done. We pay them well, much better than McDonald's ... mum and dad love it because he's with us.

[On the mums' shift] you can work from 9 to 3. There's 15–20 mums at any one time on the mums' shift. They work within the day shift [but work across both our shifts] ... we've been doing it for 2 or 3 years.

Some initial resistance to these flexible shift systems came from other employees, who believed these workers got a better deal than them. Supervisors and trainers can play an important role in challenging these beliefs.

The role of VET in developing trainers and supervisors

The case studies showed a reliance on supervisors and on-the-job trainers as key contributors to skill development of the workforce. Vocational education and training (VET) can have a positive influence on the rest of the workforce through the development of trainers and supervisors.

Changing the culture of training and supervision requires committed leadership from senior management.

It's been a big bonus [supervisor training]. It gives them a better idea of what the trainee needs, because before they were supervisors, and they were there to run the floor, they didn't know what training and assessing involved ... they understand the do's and don'ts, the legal requirements.

In contrast to processing work, supervisor training may be best undertaken offsite with a VET provider. This is particularly important in meat processing, where there is a strong culture of internal promotion and therefore limited exposure to alternative practices and customs. Providing opportunities for managers and supervisors to interact with their counterparts in other industries is a future challenge. Offsite training could play an important part in this.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

This research, based on case studies of meat-processing enterprises, revealed ways in which vocational education and training has changed in the industry. These findings, potentially applicable to other process-oriented industries, are:

- ✳ Supply chain and cost pressures on firms can increase trends toward task specialisation in process industries. This can lead to training becoming more narrowly focused (from craft to task), making it more amenable to being delivered on the job.
- ✳ When the workforce is transient or temporary, jobs will tend to be broken down into tasks that can be quickly learnt and training is kept to the minimum needed to undertake those tasks.
- ✳ In larger-scale processing work the training has increasingly become learning by watching and doing and, again, suited to being done on the job.
- ✳ As firms grow, dedicated (often in-house) training arrangements become more financially viable and preferred, especially where government training funding is offered to the employer.
- ✳ Supervisors and on-the-job trainers play a major role in modelling good work practices; vocational education and training can play an important role in further developing these people.

The first four findings demonstrate how the training systems used by the enterprises in this study have adapted to accommodate the conditions in the industry. With high turnover of staff, getting new people on the job quickly is essential.

While building a career path might make meat-processing work more attractive and potentially reduce staff turnover, the reality is that significant pools of the labour the industry can access are temporary by their very nature (for example, overseas workers and travellers). The meat-processing industry also acts as a stepping stone for people who are entering the workforce for the first time or after being unemployed and many of these move into other areas of the paid labour market.

Despite the high turnover, the researchers discovered that there are 'career' meat processors who remain in the industry for some time. These people are often attracted to the industry by the relatively good rates of pay for limited skills and qualifications; the ability to work locally; the fact that the work is relatively low stress; or because of a family connection. Despite these workers having made a career in the industry, their work is still task-based, and the associated training is quick and on the job. This is because the job design and associated training is driven by the high-turnover workforce. Any ongoing training appears to be more geared towards supervisory and management roles. Thus a career in meat processing might be one where a labourer progresses to a supervisor or manager.

As highlighted in the fifth finding above, improved supervisor training and practices result in a safer and less stressful place to work. According to the enterprises in this study, these practices also have positive effects on productivity. It is here that vocational education and training can potentially have the most positive effect on the development of the meat-processing workforce.

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