Retention of Workforce - How can rural communities like the Tablelands capture maximum benefit from professional and other highly skilled workers in the context of an increasingly mobile and transitory workforce?

Many small rural communities, with ageing populations and inadequate opportunities for young people, are not attracting permanent skilled workers, but have a flow of skilled people through the community as locums, seasonal workers or contractors. The Tablelands region, west of Cairns, is experiencing skills shortages and staff retention issues, an ageing workforce, reduced youth labour supply, low workforce participation, a looming mining boom and challenges engaging Aboriginal people in education and employment.

The largest rural industry sector on the Tablelands is tree horticulture (banana, mango, avocado, papaya, other tropical fruits and citrus). It relies heavily on a transient non-local labour source of mainly overseas backpackers to pick and pack their produce when in season. This is an intense and busy period… but due of the seasonality of the crops it does not provide permanent employment on individual farms. The rural sector has strugged to attract or retain workers due the perceptions around working conditions, pay, hours and location. There is a dearth of professionals in the rural sector in general and the Tablelands are no different to other regions in Australia. Agronomists, animal nutritional specialists, advisory services, pasture specialists, people with management experience, higher-level chemical, plant and animal expertise are highly sought after. This is reflected on the Tablelands with a shortage of professional, Para-professional and suitable people for middle level management (supervisors etc.) in the field crop and horticulture industries.

GPs no longer spend their working lives in one country town; short-term locums or doctors who work in one place for two or three years are becoming commonplace. Teachers are highly transient. Sea/tree change and down-skilling trends are seeing people move to or retire to rural areas, often only to depart again after a few years. Some seasonal workers are dropping out, temporarily or permanently, from high-level, demanding, stressful jobs. Active retirees or 'grey nomads', some with high level and specialised skills, travel the countryside. The mining and resources boom is drawing skilled workers away from some rural and regional areas to mining towns, where elevated house prices and rents are forcing many long-term residents out. Changing industrial relations laws support a more mobile workforce, however the impact of other legislation such as taxation, and professional development and other requirements for professional registration, may discourage some highly skilled workers from practising or working in rural communities.

Today's workforce is highly mobile. United States data shows today's 18–40 year olds have held an average of 10.5 jobs (in Kilpatrick et.al 2009). Rural communities can derive a wide range of benefits from mobile skilled workers (Kilpatrick et.al 2009). Many population centres in inland Australia are ageing, with the exception of some mining towns. The "brain drain" of young people, who have left the Tablelands Region, has been cited as a key constraint to the development of that Region's economy (Spies 2008). This is graphically shown in Table 1.Young people leave the Tablelands region in search of educational and employment opportunities in larger regional centres, capital cities or industries offering better wages and conditions.

The reasons for choosing to remain in or leave small rural communities fall into four groups:
- work and career factors;
- personal and family factors;
- community factors;
- and policy settings.

People in rural communities and those who employ highly skilled mobile skilled workers can influence these factors to varying extents.

Figure 1: Age Distribution, Tablelands Regional Council 2006 and projected 2021.
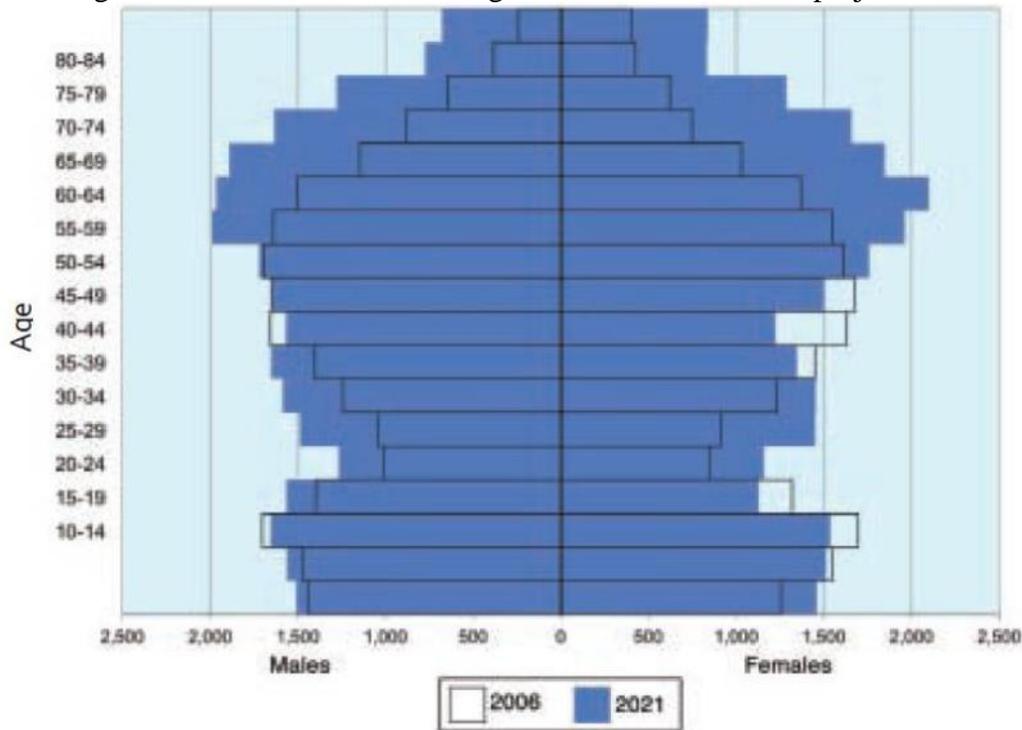
Source: Queensland Government population
projections to 2031: local government areas, 2011 edition,
Office of Economic and Statistical Research, Queensland Treasury 2011

A report by the National Institute of Economic and Industry Research (2006) for the Queensland Government supports a link between ageing and poorer average outcomes for the working-age population. Argent (2002) notes that economic fundamentalism and environmentalism are changing traditional farming communities and creating many distinct types of 'rural' communities. While global forces are driving industry restructuring outside metropolitan Australia, the impacts of these forces, on communities with similar characteristics, may differ. Research indicates that rural community renewal is linked to creative and idealist new settlers (Kenyon and Black 2001) and that more innovative people are likely to move into an area that is welcoming and attractive (Plowman et al. 2003).

A study of progressive rural communities in Queensland (Plowman et al. 2003) found that these progressive (and innovative) communities share a number of features in relation to the mobility of residents. Such communities have higher proportions of residents who have lived elsewhere, and who have come from a larger community which adds to community 'brain gain' (Plowman et al., 2003).

Table 1. Post-school qualifications, Tablelands & Queensland, 2011

	Have a higher Qualification	Certificate (I,II,III,IV)	Advanced Diploma	Bachelor degree or higher
Tablelands	51.1%	20.7%	6.3%	9.9%
Queensland	54.2%	19.9%	7.5%	15.9%

The study also found that these newer arrivals had a slightly higher average educational level, and were more open-minded, than those who had lived in the community all their lives. This links with work by Florida (2003) on the Creative Class, which suggests regions should try to aim at people such as professionals to come and live and work because of their capacity to boost economic activity. However, there is no research on capturing benefits from highly skilled people who transit through communities and regions.

Making the most of the available pool of skills will improve resilience, identification and uptake of opportunities such as new enterprises, good practice in natural resource management, enhanced social and leisure opportunities, and improved services (Kilpatrick et.al 2009).

So how do we keep mobile, skilled workers?

So how do we encourage mobile, skilled workers to remain for extended periods to the benefit of the community? Community and individual factors will have an effect, so there is a need to appreciate how a match between the two can be facilitated. Community leadership, interactional infrastructure and the degree to which the community embraces diversity are some of the community influences which have been identified as affecting the ability of rural communities to handle change and are likely to be some of the factors which enable communities to optimise the benefits of mobile, skilled workers (Kilpatrick and Loechel 2004).

Retention is more likely when mobile skilled workers had been helped to create a sense of place, which in turn promoted a sense of belonging. Mobile skilled workers were likely to remain longer in rural communities if their families were also assisted to integrate and become involved in the community. This includes assistance in finding voluntary and/or paid employment for spouses and partners, along with proactive approaches by community groups to assist the family in integrating into the community. Often there was a stronger focus on recruitment and retention than on integration, illustrated by various incentives offered to mobile skilled workers to encourage them to enter rural communities and to remain longer. Community and policy settings that focused largely on retention may have been too late for some mobile skilled workers, who had already chosen to leave the community because an earlier disappointing rural experience. Financial incentives need to be coupled with social support programs in an effort to provide an overall positive experience and satisfaction with a rural lifestyle (Kilpatrick et. al 2009).

Leadership, collaboration & cooperation

Communities which are proactive in welcoming mobile skilled workers and their families and helping them to integrate are likely to derive considerable benefits from mobile skilled workers during their stay. Many mobile skilled workers commented on the importance of feeling a sense of belonging which is fostered by positive community settings that assist them to develop social networks, such as a formalised welcome or induction process, or an invitation to join a community group.

Local community members who act as boundary crossers play an important role in linking mobile skilled workers to the community.

Leadership is critical in developing interactional infrastructure and is closely aligned to community culture. A community leadership process where the contributions of all community members are valued is a powerful signal to mobile skilled workers that their involvement is both expected and appreciated. While it is important to capture the talents and skills of people who come to work and live in a community, communities also actively build their capacity by mentoring others (Kilpatrick et. al 2009).

There is a clear leadership role for specific groups and organisations within rural communities, such as local government, schools and workplaces, to build interactional infrastructure. The findings demonstrate the importance of the workplace and the employer to mobile skilled worker integration into the community. Employers play a number of roles that assist mobile skilled workers to integrate into the community, including promoting and supporting community involvement by their staff (Kilpatrick et. al 2009).

The challenge for communities like the Tablelands is to get collaboration in what have traditionally been several communities of interest that have not worked well together as a region. There is a divide between the former (and soon to become again) Mareeba Shire and the three former Southern Shires. There is a historical lack of collaboration and cooperation within the region. The whole region is very parochial along Town and former Shire lines. This is very evident in the Tablelands Community Plan. While the document and process are exceptional, the aspirations put forward by locals highlights the focus on the towns they live in, rather than the broader Tablelands region. Many within the region feel disenfranchised by both State and Federal Government following dairy deregulation, the closure of the tobacco industry, shire amalgamation etc. It was only in March 2008 that the four former Shires were merged and, following a vote for de-amalgamation on 9 March 2012, Mareeba Shire will separate and become its own Shire once again. The three southern Shires worked together prior to amalgamation, in a shared services model and are a "community of interest" (geographically similar in terms of population base, demographics and wet tropical upland climate – largely dairy, beef fattening and cropping). There is a tendency, by some in community leadership positions to be more reactive, than proactive. This was never shown more clearly than with the recent de-amalgamation vote. Some of this is cultural, historical and possibly industry based.

The challenge, for the whole Tablelands, is to get collaboration on broader issues like population growth, an ageing population, the "Brain Drain" of youth leaving the region and resilience in the face of Global pressures. There has been some willingness by some industry representatives/ groups however there are others who are continually "jockeying" for position in the new local environment; particularly in competing for funding. If there is not genuine willingness to collaborate with all those willing to participate in addressing workforce and skills development, then the region faces the real risk of division and fracture.

Communities which expect too much of skilled employees may be at risk of losing their contributions through burnout, or excluding and alienating some of the traditional residents. Sustainable regional communities are in need of a set of strategies that enable them to capture benefits from highly skilled, but mobile skilled workers, who pass through rural communities and how to encourage some workers to remain for extended periods. Some of these strategies will relate to all newcomers, such as actively seeking and welcoming young families and promoting the community widely (Plowman et al. 2003).

A higher skills level is needed for the future and a well-educated and skilled workforce is essential to the economic growth and social wellbeing of the Tablelands Region. An educated and skilled workforce assists in building social capital and facilitates productive engagement with government and community organisations.

As a region the Tablelands needs to develop a distinct regional identity and regional brand to promote the region not only to attract tourists and economic activity, but also to attract "knowledge workers" who would come to the Tablelands for its unique lifestyle, climate and friendly community while being able to work.

The Postcard Survey, conducted during the Tablelands Community Planning process found that the most highly valued aspects of the Tablelands are:
• The tropical highland climate
• The rural, relaxed lifestyle
• The rural, farm landscape
• The natural environment, especially the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area
• The farming economy and way of life
• The small country town atmosphere
• The sense of community
• That it is a good place to raise children (Tablelands Community Plan 2021).

This is a good start to build on. From a Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC) study project into exploring how rural communities can capture the advantages from highly skilled mobile workers found although mobile skilled workers share some generic characteristics, including rural affinity, commitment to the community, and flexibility and adaptability, they come from a wide range of age groups and backgrounds. They include single people, those with dependent children, and empty nesters. The motivations and types of involvement of these different types of mobile skilled workers differ (Kilpatrick et. al. 2009).

The nature of the community can determine the sorts of mobile skilled workers who are attracted in that physical appearance, location, services and activities available, and overall community culture can be powerful attractants to newcomers. Newcomers attracted to a community because of the particular features of that community are more likely to want to contribute to that community (Kilpatrick et. al. 2009). Mobile skilled workers who want to integrate take advantage of informal and formal opportunities to involve themselves in community life. This includes offering their skills and knowledge, as well as being receptive to approaches by community members. Communities in the RIRDC study were strengthened because of the contributions made by mobile skilled workers. An enduring legacy of their stay was increased levels of social capital and community capacity which enhanced community access to knowledge, skills and resources.

Infrastructure

Appropriate levels of infrastructure, and the quality of services, feature in the decisions of mobile skilled workers to enter and remain in rural communities. These factors can help to encourage or discourage rural recruitment and retention. These same factors influenced the length of stay in rural communities. The findings show that community infrastructure and services, if absent or inadequate, can deter people from remaining in rural communities, but these factors alone do not determine mobile skilled worker retention.

Such infrastructure includes child care, schools, particularly quality secondary schools, tertiary education for updating the workers' skills, health care, quality and affordable housing, transport out of and within the community, and cultural activities. In some instances recruitment and retention can be negatively affected by factors outside the control of employers or the community more broadly, such as insufficient housing due to the slow release of land by Council or State Government.

One quote from a Tablelands Agribusiness person in a Rural survey conducted in 2010 was as follows "*Lack of facilities; things to do for teens. Hard to get decent, affordable accommodation (rentals). No entertainment (night-life, café latte set); Good hospital, schools – but lacking specialty facilities*". This sums up a number of issues the Tablelands faces.

There is a lack of Transport infrastructure on the Tablelands, particularly around farms, and particularly in the horticulture industry which relies heavily on seasonal labour for harvests. There is only one Bus company running daily down to Cairns. QiTE run a transport fleet of 7 vehicles out to properties during the picking season. During the peak they run up to 200 workers out to farms and return daily.

There is a shortage of affordable accommodation /rental housing in the region. This may limit our potential, as a region, to attract mobile, skilled workers. Rentals are usually based on a six months lease and the average weekly rent for a 3 bedroom house is $260 - $320. There are a high number of low budget renters seeking to upgrade to larger houses. The average price for a standard urban house in Mareeba or Atherton is in the range of $300,000 to $380,000 and generally, the property prices are higher than Cairns, due to the limited housing stock available on the Tablelands. There is also a lack of short-term accommodation for seasonal workers.

There is also a current shortage of Aged accommodation in the region. The building of new Aged care facilities would open up new business opportunities for goods and services to support the increasingly important retirement sector on the Tablelands. Unfortunately, the Draft FNQ 2031 Regional Plan has not included Aged care in the Urban footprint and has limited accommodation ventures outside of the so-called urban areas to 20 beds.

According to the information obtained from consultation, mothers wanting to return to work are unable to do so because of the limited child care places available. Moreover, the high costs of child care is also restricting people from entering the workforce.

Work and career factors

Job satisfaction, career progression and, in some cases, the opportunity to earn a high income, are the main work-related reasons that the mobile skilled workers give for moving to rural communities. These reasons were also significant in their decision to remain within the community. While high wages, subsidised housing, school fees and free internet were mentioned as incentives to remain in remote communities, '*at the end of the day there's job satisfaction*' (Kilpatrick et. al. 2009). People whose skills were not recognised by employers in the community are more likely to leave. Intrusion on personal time and space as work can also be an occupational hazard for professionals in rural communities. This can reduce satisfaction with the rural experience and make people less likely to remain. A study by Kilpatrick et. al (2009) also found that there is a group of mobile skilled workers who primarily moved to rural communities for work-related reasons, and who had a set timeline or career plan. This group is likely to leave the community once they had achieved their goals, regardless of the nature of the community and their satisfaction with the lifestyle.

Training

Often, owners/managers of Rural Enterprises don't recognise the value of formal training. Some may think that employees gaining formal qualifications mean that they may have to pay more. Often skills gained, have been gained "on the job"… and could be readily transferable to other industries, but have not been formally recognised. There is a need for business skills, financial skills, people management skills, marketing, leadership and entrepreneurial skills within Rural Industry here on Tablelands.

Training is one reason staff may remain with a business.

The Art of conversation - Personal Language to use with Employees

Many people are motivated by praise and we need to communicate effectively to retain staff. No one gets enough praise. It can really make the difference between being an Employer of Choice and an employee remaining and seeking employment elsewhere. As a society are we losing the art of conversation? Pick someone - anyone - who does or did something well and say, ***"It was exceptional how you..."*** Feel free to go back in time. Saying "***Earlier, I was thinking about how you handled that situation really well and as a result you have turned around what could potentially result a negative outcome"*** can make just as positive an impact today as it would have then. It could even make a bigger impact, because it shows you still remember what happened last month, and you still think about it. Praise is a gift that costs the giver nothing but is priceless to the recipient. The people around you will love the giver for it - and they'll like themselves a little better, too (Dart 2013).

As an employer, you're in charge, but that does not mean you're smarter, savvier, or more insightful than everyone else. Back up your statements and decisions. Justify with logic, not with position or authority. Though taking the time to explain your decisions open them to discussion or criticism, it also opens it up for improvement. Authority can make you "right," but collaboration makes everyone right - and makes everyone pull together. ***"Here's what I'm thinking"*** and ***"Can you help me?"*** are two more good phrases to use often. When you need help, regardless of the type of help you need or the person you need it from, just say, sincerely and humbly, "***Can you help me?".*** By doing that, you will display humility, respect, and a willingness to listen, which are all qualities of a great leader and a great friend (Dart 2013).

"Can you show me?" - Advice is temporary; knowledge is forever. Knowing what to do helps, but knowing how or why to do it means everything. When you ask to be taught or shown, several things happen: You implicitly show you respect the person giving the advice; you show trust in his or her experience, skill, and insight; and you get to better assess the value of the advice. Don't just ask for input. Ask to be taught or trained or shown – you both win (Dart 2013).

"I'm sorry." - We all make mistakes, so we all have things we need to apologise for - words, actions, omissions, failing to step-up, step-in, show support and the list goes on.
Say you're sorry, but never follow an apology with a disclaimer like "But I was really mad, because..." or "But I did think you were..." or any statement that in any way places even the smallest amount of blame back on the other person. Say you're sorry, say why you're sorry, and take all the blame. No less. No more (Dart 2013).

Adopting these five key statements into every day interaction with employees would build trust, inspire, heighten employee engagement and foster a strong working relationship built on respect.

For such strategies to be successful, however, employers and manages needed to live and breathe them. Build it into your culture. The thing about lists like these is they tend to be composites of all the best qualities we've seen in ourselves and others, or how we'd like to be treated in a professional environment. That's certainly the case here so, if you are putting a few of these points into practice, you're probably doing fine. But make no mistake – it never hurts to treat your colleagues and members of staff equally, fairly and with respect (Dart 2013).

Recruitment: 3 big hiring mistakes that cost time and money

Three common mistakes can set companies, both large and small, back thousands (or even millions) of dollars each year. Worst of all, big mistakes in the hiring process mean you're probably missing out on the talent you desperately need in your business. To save time and money, here are three common mistakes employers should avoid:

Not encouraging employee referrals

The benefits of hiring internal referrals (recommendations from existing staff members) are three-fold. Referrals tend to last twice as long, perform better (when you work with someone who actually referred you to the business, you would want to demonstrate that you are a great fit), and are more likely to have a better appreciation of the company culture before signing on the dotted line. So, if an employer is not investing in an employee referral program, they're potentially missing out on talented and loyal employees (Dart 2013).

Scrambling to fill a role

Don't wait until you desperately have a recruitment need before starting to look for candidates. Rather, the best time to be sourcing is when you have fewer jobs to fill and are under less pressure. Procrastinating may be detrimental to your cost-of-employment - after all, recruiting the right person may take anywhere from 30 hours to more than 100 hours per position (Dart 2013).

Remain in touch with potential candidates, send them your company or business news, industry alerts and articles you think they would be interested in. A great way to keep track of your pipeline is through a CRM program which allows you to add notes to your candidate files.
Passive candidates are not going to readily apply to your job openings; you need to find a way to build meaningful, long-term relationships with your talent pipeline. After all, you are selling them your brand alongside the prospect of working within your business. You want your 'brand' to stay in top of mind – much like how you would want your customers to think of you. Ultimately, everyone who connects with your business can become an advocate (Dart 2013).

Valuing direct experience more than cultural fit

Skills are important; no one dismisses good qualifications. But in today's flooded job market, there's something to be said about finding a candidate who will fit into your company culture. Employee turnover is costly, and ill-fitting employees are more likely to pack their bags.
Again, employee referrals are a great source for finding like-minded individuals who will enjoy working in a culture where they naturally fit in. AWX Director, Cameron Dart said, "*While it is not necessarily easy to hire the best, by taking these three points into consideration as part of your hiring process, you'll protect your bottom line and attract the top talent you need to move your business forward. The costs and impact associated with an employee who leaves the business can be quite significant*".

While many businesses focus on the bottom line and look at worker productivity, employers cannot afford to ignore the money drain of an inefficient hiring process (Dart 2013).

Employers, local government, schools, churches, other community groups and institutions and individual community leaders and residents can all influence the integration and retention of workers, and the benefits that flow to communities beyond their job roles. Policy has a limited sphere of influence in the retention of highly skilled mobile skilled workers. Financial incentives and especially quality services, particularly good-quality affordable housing and schooling can attract workers and persuade some to remain beyond the time them intended to stay. However job satisfaction, career opportunities and lifestyle are more important in keeping skilled workers in rural communities. Singularly, neither financial nor social incentives will achieve long-term retention. Workplace culture and support, community culture, leadership and interactional infrastructure are factors within the control of rural communities that can affect the benefits they gain from skilled mobile skilled workers, and can influence how long a worker will remain in the community (Kilpatrick et. al 2009).

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