

# Partners in the workforce

By Barb Grey, Mungindi

The workforce characteristics and history of our Mungindi cotton-farming operation over the past years may be familiar to some of you — unable to fill vacancies for months, and those who did decide to venture west of the ‘sandstone curtain’ (a pizza delivery boy who thought he could give it a go) were generally underwhelming in attendance and performance.

It was hard to compete with the bright lights of the city and the lure of the mining industry — a poor attitude to working out west prevailed. We were leading from the rear and it was time for a change. For Ralph (husband) and I, our ‘lightbulb moment’ was in deciding to change our labour source. We wanted to develop an effective and efficient team, with low turnover. So we looked at recruiting from South Africa and Zimbabwe.

It has not been a simple, quick or easy recruiting journey. We found long lead times — approximately three months to place an employee — and then there were the cultural challenges associated with moving people from low mechanisation/high labour to high mechanisation/low labour agriculture. We were also particularly mindful of the migrant’s needs for support, both at work and socially, during the transition period.

Whilst it has been challenging, it has been one of the best investments we have made. The South Africans and Zimbabweans find the more remote western towns of Queensland and NSW are safer and more attractive than their previous living arrangements, and most notably, they are reliable, honest, committed and hard working.

## RECRUITING JOURNEY

As part of our recruiting journey we met Peter McCleary, the principal of HRM Partners, who had been recruiting people into western and north-western NSW for 15 years. Peter agreed to be my ‘mentor’ and our business relationship blossomed. Peter has run on-farm workshops for us, as we aim to build new and on-going human resource management strategies to maximise the return on our labour investment.

Peter introduced us to a psychometric analysis tool invaluable in determining the strengths and weaknesses of each individual staff member, ensuring that we learnt the most effective ways of dealing



From left to right — Werner Pienaar, Peter Mostert, Barb Grey and Jacques Oosthuizen standing in cotton grown by Peter, Werner and Jacques.

with the different personalities in our work team. This understanding of their natural personality strengths has meant that we have been able to improve the management and consequent performance of our employees.

These same psychometric tools are used by Peter in all recruiting that he does, as his experience has reaffirmed its much greater accuracy than the ‘eyeball strategy’ we have used in past farm employee selection. Now that we are recruiting employees from the other side of the world, it seems to make great sense to use psychometric tools to improve the employee recruitment and retention outcomes.

The chronic labour and skills shortages being experienced by all sectors of Australia’s labour force, and the acknowledgement that the staff shortages in agriculture are not going to improve over the next 20 years, have meant the workforce challenges of the past are on-going. We believe we have the proven resources to offer solutions to the agricultural labour problem, for those farmers prepared to take a longer term strategic view of their business.

## SPECIFIC FOCUS

Workforce Partners (Queensland) is now focussed specifically on helping farmers and businesses in regional NSW and Queensland to resolve their skill shortages,

by recruiting South Africans and Zimbabweans who are looking to migrate to the rural sector in Australia.

This will not be your ‘normal’ recruiting business. Our business has three specific and dedicated arms:

- Peter McCleary and HRM Partners introduce best-practice recruitment practices, including psychometric testing of both client and candidate, genuine understanding of client and candidate requirements and extensive reference checking.
- Peter Mostert, Jacques Oosthuizen and Werner Pienaar are our international farming staff, and will be sourcing and interviewing candidates from overseas, based on their genuine knowledge and network of farmers in South Africa and Zimbabwe.
- Barb Grey contributes an extensive knowledge and network of Australian rural operations.

Workforce Partners (Queensland) will help farmers and other rural business owners improve the quality and performance of their workforce. We will be based in Mungindi, which, as our farming staff testify (defying the prevailing national mindset) is a great place to live and work. See our advertisement in this magazine if you would like a free consultation and initial assessment of solutions to your staffing requirements.