

In summer 2007 the UW Extension collaborated with the Program on Agricultural Technology Studies at UW-Madison to conduct a survey of both dairy employees and employers in Fond du Lac and Sheboygan counties. The information gathered provides insight into many of the issues and opportunities that exist within Wisconsin's dairy workforce.

Dairies were randomly selected from a list of farms with 200 or more cows. We interviewed all workers (309) from the selected dairies as well as one of the owners or managers (34). The data was cleaned, entered, and analyzed in a statistical database. The identities of the interviewees and participating farms remained strictly confidential.

The main objective of the survey was to document key characteristics of dairy employment and the experiences of workers in the industry. The study was structured around questions relating to work and family life, interaction in the community, language skills, and career advancement. Another objective of the study was to compare the perceptions of employers and employees with respect to various aspects of the workplace. Table 1 reports key findings of the study. In the following paragraphs we highlight some findings of particular interest:

Workplace training: Sixty-five percent of employees reported receiving training when they started their current job, and 96 percent of those who received training felt it was adequate in order to perform the job. Furthermore, nearly 80 percent of the workforce expressed interest in learning advanced skills, such as animal health care or machinery operation. This strong interest in learning advanced skills puts a premium on the bilingual language abilities of dairy employees and management.

Language skills: Although only one-quarter of employers cited communication as a problem on the farm, many were quick to note that more advanced job skills require fluency or near-fluency in English. The survey found that only 22 percent of employees would classify their English as good or fluent. In order to capitalize on this interest to learn advanced skills, language deficiencies need to be addressed. Of the employees who have not taken any language classes, 90 percent expressed interest in taking a course to improve their second language. This study highlights the importance of creating more effective language training so that employers can take advantage of employee interest in learning advanced skills.

Settlement: An increasing number of immigrant foreign-born workers envision Wisconsin as their medium to long-term residence (more than 5 years). Thirty-four percent of foreign-born employees see themselves living here in 2017. This is very promising for employers seeking a stable workforce. The study also uncovered areas for improvement in terms of community and settlement. Of the immigrant workers interviewed, 71 percent cited contact with fellow immigrants outside of work. This means that almost one-third of foreign-born workers don't have social interaction outside of work. Employers and community members need to start looking at ways to reduce the number of employees who feel isolated from the larger community. If a significant percentage of employees continue to feel isolated, employers will always have a difficult time securing a long-term workforce.

Please refer to the following page for more descriptive results and statistics.

Table 1

Points of Comparison between Employer and Employee Responses

	Employer Response	Employee Response
Average starting pay (employer response) and average current wage (employee response)	8.19/hour	9.72/hour
Average length of time at dairy (per employee)	3.2 years	3.4 years
Average number of hours worked (weekly)	56 hours	55 hours
Average number of days off (monthly)	4.6 days	4.8 days
Percentage who cited communication difficulties (only immigrant employees reported here)	27%	35%
Average number of days trained when hired	5 days	6.2 days
Use of referrals for filling vacancies (% employers) and for finding work (% employees)	86%	86%
Percent of employers offering each benefit and percent of employees receiving the benefit		
Health insurance or money for health care	40%	23%
Performance bonus	33%	16%
Paid vacation	30%	13%
Retirement savings	24%	5%
Free or discounted housing	21%	9%
Other	13%	5%
Free dairy or meat products (meals)	12%	4%

Summary of Key Employee Responses

% of employees (immigrant) that have experienced discrimination in Wisconsin	23%
% of employees (immigrant) that feel that they are part of a community in Wisconsin	78%
% of employees (immigrant) that cited contact with other immigrants outside of work	71%
% of employees (immigrant) that envision living in Wisconsin in the year 2017	34%
% of employees that have worked on a dairy before their current dairy employment	60%
% of employees that would like more hours than they are currently working	22%
% of employees that cite Veracruz, Mexico as their state of origin	35%
% of employees that cite Wisconsin as their state of origin	29%
% of employees that cite Mexico as their country of origin	66%
% of employees that cite the United States as their country of origin	30%
% of employees that have at least a high school education	36%
% of employees who reported being injured on the job	31%
% of employees who reported an interest in further (more technical) training on the dairy	70%
% of those employees who want further training that are interested in animal health care	43%
% of employees who classified their second language skills (either English or Spanish) as none	29%
% of employees who classified their second language skills (either English or Spanish) as some	53%
% of employees who classified their second language skills (either English or Spanish) as good	2%
% of employees who classified their second language skills (either English or Spanish) as fluent	8%
% of employees who are male	86%

Summary of Key Employer Responses

Average year employers started employing people	1989
Average year employers started employing immigrants	2000
Average % yearly turnover expressed by employers	16%
Average cost of turnover per new employee (cost of training, administration, ect..)	\$2,100
% of employers who cited co-workers as their main resource for training new personnel	61%
% of employers who cited a manager or supervisor as their main source for training new personnel	30%
% of employers who do not do worker performance evaluations	59%
% of employers who have at a minimum some bilingual staff for facilitating communication on the dairy	45%
% of employers who have both bilingual staff and outside interpreters aid in communication	52%
% of employers who recognized that immigrants have faced challenges moving to a new country	90%
% of employers who feel that their workers could use more safety training	44%
% of employers who have between 0 and 300 cows	30%
% of employers who have between 301 and 600 cows	33%
% of employers who have between 601- and 900 cows	26%
% of employers who have between 901 and 1200 cows	7%
% of employers who have more than 1200 cows	4%