

Future farmers need the edge

By SIMON LIVINGSTONE

FARMING businesses have not always attracted and employed the brightest, most forward-thinking managers to work in the rural industry.

The sector has historically employed a predominantly male management workforce and daughters of farming families have often been discouraged to take on a management role within the business. Many capable daughters have therefore obtained employment off farm.

In many farming businesses, it is presumed the sons will take on an active management role, regardless of their level of experience and education. It is not been uncommon to hear farmers say: "My son has not performed very well at school. However, that is all right. He is only going back to manage the family farm."

Little consideration has been given to the fact that the family farm is a small business with assets quite often in excess of \$1 million or \$2 million.

High levels of skill are required to successfully manage a small business and should not be restricted to only one gender. Australian agriculture needs both male and female farm managers who are innovative and strategic thinkers.

Rural industry cannot afford to be bound by conservative attitudes and management philosophies. History has shown business sectors that do not attempt to be innovative and use appropriate technologies are likely to fail in the long term.

Farm managers of the future will need to adapt themselves and their businesses to cope with complexity and change. Managers will be required to be pro-active in creating new opportunities and be appropriately skilled or it will be difficult for them to maintain their competitiveness.

So how can farm managers of the future prepare and equip themselves with the skills needed to succeed in the global community? Many important skills can be learned and developed by employees working full-time in the rural sector.

A plethora of manual competency tasks can be mastered on the job. But the question remains: Will people aspiring to a career in agriculture learn more by working in the business or by completing formal study?

It is important that farm managers have both advanced manual and management skills. But it can be quite difficult for budding future managers to develop the critical cognitive skills required of business leaders in the future solely through on-the-job training.

It is often beneficial, and sometimes necessary, for staff who aspire to managers' positions to complement their learning on the job with formalised education. Training managers to think strategically takes a lot longer than training a station-hand to complete a manual task.

To obtain, develop and master all the skills required to be an efficient business manager by working full-time with no formal study to help may not be possible

or achievable. Agricultural education institutions thus have an important and valuable role to play in preparing and developing business leaders of the future. **IMPORTANT LINK:** Successful educational institutions of the future will be those that have developed strong links with their business community. Relevant, up-to-date curricula are required that will develop the managerial skills of rural business managers.

Some important concepts can be efficiently taught through classroom-based instruction, while other essential skills are best learnt through practical experience. It is important that courses developed for the agricultural industry are not purely theoretically based.

After all, farming in this country remains a highly practical occupation. There will always be a role for educational institutions to teach learners manual skills.

However, agricultural courses that train people in manual aspects of agriculture need to challenge their thinking and encourage development of their cognitive skills or run the risk of under-preparing people for management roles in the future.

What often occurs is farmers start their careers as jackeroos, jillaroos or stationhands. As they progress through their career, they are given the responsibility of managing people and resources.

The manual skills they have learnt along the way are very useful, but due to their promotion or career progression, they require advanced problem-solving skills so they can effectively handle the

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◀ many challenges a management position creates.

Unfortunately, many farm managers are not suitably prepared for this transition. Often newly appointed, perhaps inexperienced managers, receive little support in the way of training from their employer.

Those who reach management positions in the rural industry due to their advanced manual-skill competencies are often thrown in the deep end with little or no training in business management.

Australian farmers are noted for their low levels of tertiary education and even lower participation in management training. But research has shown that raising the education levels of farmers can lead to increased profitability.

Those who work in the agricultural sector and who aspire to a career in management must be prepared to take an active interest in, and take responsibility for, their own learning. If Australian agriculture is to develop and prosper, the management levels of farm business managers will need to increase and improve.

EDUCATORS' RESPONSIBILITY: Educational institutions have a responsibility to the rural industry to provide the most up-to-date training. Tertiary institutions need to recruit and select the best staff available and be prepared to encourage and support their professional development.

Through this approach, educators will remain at the forefront of their individual field of expertise. Educators need to be encouraged to interact regularly with, and gather experience from, the business sector, as well as continue to upgrade their formal qualifications.

Colleges and universities need to regularly review their teaching methods and educational technologies so that learners are provided with the best possible instruction. Educators need to review not only what they teach, but also how they teach the course content.

Often the best educators are those who have a real passion for their discipline and demonstrate a desire to share it with students. Part of a teacher's responsibility should be to use learning methods that maintain students' interest.



It is important for farm managers to have both advanced manual and management skills.

Sometimes referred to as a journey, good teaching leaves the learner with the desire to want more. Clearly, the students' engagement with content is likely to be more meaningful if they share the teachers' sense of challenge and enthusiasm.

Beyond teaching specific content, effective teachers facilitate independent learning and try to develop in the learner a series of generic learning skills.

It is important that learners develop a willingness and desire to tackle difficult issues as well as a questioning approach when carrying out business activities. Educators should challenge the way students think about issues and encourage them to seek alternative solutions to problems.

Students graduating from educational institutions should not regard their qualification as an end-product. The rural industry needs a workforce that views education as a process that continues throughout life.

The benefit gained from education is that the student develops a broadened outlook on the world. Education creates confidence in the learner — confidence to accept, challenge and try new ideas and practices.

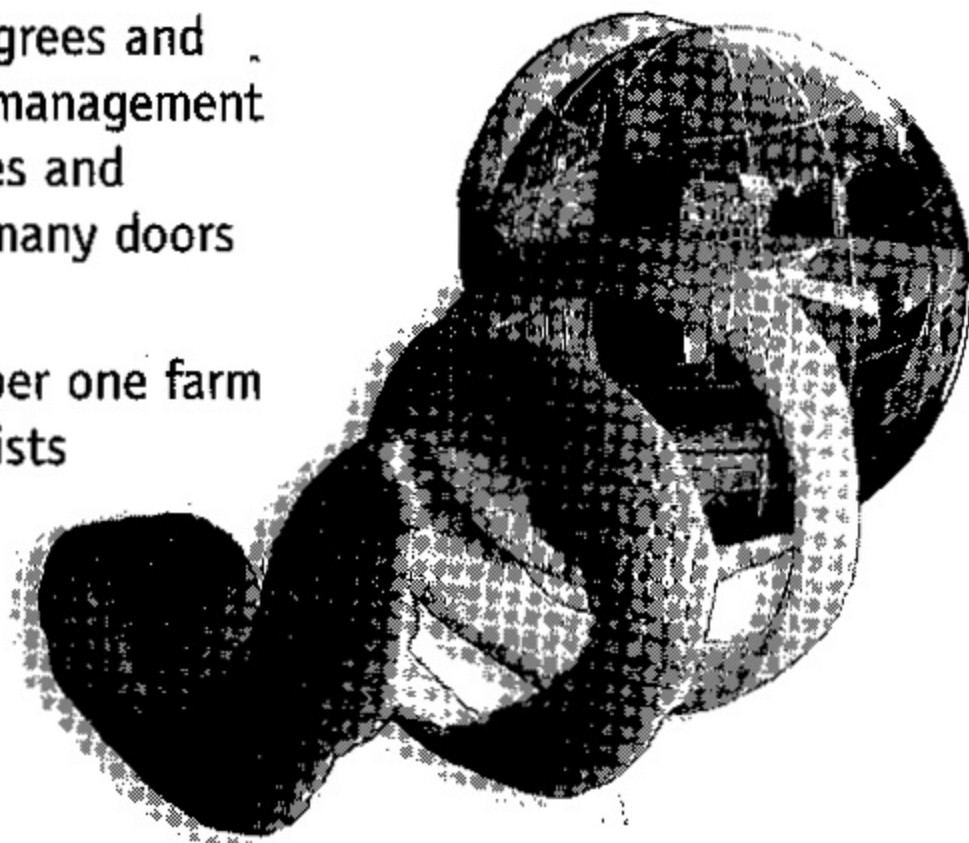
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