

## **Improving Employment Relationships: findings from learning interventions in farm employment**

**Ruth Nettle\*, Mark Paine\* & John Petheram\***

### **Abstract**

This article reports on research investigating the extent to which “learning interventions” can improve farm employment relationships. A learning intervention is a designed social process to support a relatively permanent change in behaviour, with the emphasis being on change rather than acquiring new skills alone. Industry, government or small business agencies often invest in interventions to minimise employment turnover and improve employment relations. This investment often involves employer training in HRM procedures, employee skills training, or an industrial relations focus involving information and advocacy. In this article, such interventions in the farm sector are seen to fall short in addressing and supporting the significant cultural change required on the part of farm employment participants for effective employment relationships (eg. embedded attitudes and customs about farm work and employment conditions that work against effective working relationships). This signals the need for different approaches to support change in farm employment. The article outlines the design, implementation and results from two case studies of learning interventions to support dairy farm employment in Victoria, Australia. The first case involved a group of farm employers; the second case involved three groups of farm employers and their employees. Both cases involved participants working on improving farm employment outcomes over a period of 9-15 months. Findings from the case studies suggest that learning interventions foster critical reflection on employment expectations, and highlight how current behaviour in employment situations impacts employment outcomes. Further, learning interventions support different action in employment (changed behaviour). These findings support earlier research that identified the important role attitudes and values played in hindering improved employment. Learning interventions therefore represent a breakthrough for catalysing employment change. However, they also require appropriate facilitation as well as ongoing support to ensure the change is embedded in workplace practice. There are also limits to the extent to which learning interventions can effectively support improvement in employment and these are discussed.

---

\* Dr Ruth Nettle is a Research Fellow in Innovation and Change Management, Faculty of Land and Food Resources, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Australia.

\* Dr Mark Paine is a Principal Research Fellow in Innovation and Change Management, Faculty of Land and Food Resources, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Australia.

\* Dr John Petheram is a Senior Lecturer (School of Resource Management), Faculty of Land and Food Resources, University of Melbourne, Creswick, Australia.

The authors would like to acknowledge the funding provided for this research by Dairy Australia (formerly known as the Dairy Research and Development Corporation) through their research scholarship program (Case study 1) and Industrial Relations Victoria “Partners at work” program that provided funding for the employer-employee groups in Case study 2.

## **Introduction**

A previous article (Nettle *et al*, 2005) has reported on research to understand change processes in farm employment relationships, with a focus on the Australian Dairy Industry. This understanding was encapsulated in a conceptual model that linked four main process categories: “Core principles guiding employment”, “Mediating processes” in employment relationships, “Change Processes”, and “Relationship outcomes” (Refer Figure 3.). The research addressed a gap in understanding of the employment relationship and the changes that influence the relationship within a rural setting. However, for employers, employees and third parties (i.e. industry groups, advisers, government agencies), improving employment relationships is a key issue. Little previous research has addressed the nature of interventions and support required to improve employment relationships. This issue is of particular importance in the dairy industry in which turnover and attractiveness of the industry are seen as explanatory factors in labour shortages (ACIRRT, 2004b; Bodi *et al*, 1999) and are areas in which effective employment relationships play a central role. In general, the focus of the Australian dairy industry in improving human resources and employment has been toward increasing farm labour supply and skills or improving the ability of employers in business and people “management” through training (Murray Dairy, 1999; Bodi and Maggs, 2001). There have also been efforts to improve the image of dairying as a career of choice, and to attract young people to the industry via apprenticeship schemes. There has been little evaluation of the impact or role of such approaches on improving employment issues for the industry, and a recent industry strategy has suggested major investment in interventions to improve employment issues (Dairy Australia, 2005; ACIRRT, 2004a). However Nettle *et al*, (2005) have argued that it is a lack of an employment relationship perspective in employment interventions that has hindered their impact.

This article reports on empirical research investigating the extent to which “learning interventions” can improve farm employment relationships. A learning intervention is a designed social process to support a relatively permanent change in behaviour, with the emphasis being on change rather than acquiring new skills alone. Focusing on the Australian Dairy industry, the article begins with a review of intervention approaches to improve employment and introduces learning theories as a foundation for the design of interventions. The remaining discussion focuses on empirical research involving an analysis of two learning interventions with employers and employees and includes the research methodology, the results and their implications. In particular, the research is used to develop a framework for successful learning interventions that support improvement in employment relationships.

## **Intervention in improving employment**

Intervention, according to economists, is normally considered necessary when there is “market failure” (i.e., when the operation of normative processes of supply and demand is either erratic or lags, or causes imbalance, or the market is operating imperfectly). In these cases, intervention often takes the form of regulation or fiscal policy. In line with such economic approaches, intervention in employment generally serves four purposes; (1) to improve the total supply of people to businesses (in this case farm businesses); (2) to improve the demand for people (particularly youth and the long term unemployed) by businesses; (3) to improve the skill of people entering

and in employment; and (4) to help employees and employers find each other in a diverse, difficult and changing market environment (DETYA, 2001).

It is the nature of these interventions that is important in understanding to what extent these purposes are being met. For instance successful training schemes to enhance the skills of employees for an industry are dependent on attraction strategies for maintaining or improving the supply of people to an industry. The contribution of employer training schemes is dependent on how the skills and knowledge is applied and also the employee's ability to participate in employment relationships. The success of job matching interventions is dependent on the longevity of the match, which is most often not formally supported.

In a study investigating the role of employer "best-employment practice" groups to improve labour attraction and retention (Edkins, 2004) the development of a code of practice for employers in employment was found to explain only part of the change in employer practices. The assessment/auditing process, the employee training standards, the collective discussion and action of participants were seen as critical components for change. This suggests an equal, if not greater, importance on the change process involved with interventions as the tools or content of the intervention.

Further, three reasons have been proposed for alternative approaches to interventions for improving employment relationships (Nettle, et al 2005). Firstly, employment relationships have different outcomes other than retention and turnover and achieving outcomes of balance, resilience or synergy require mutual action on the part of employers and employees (see Nettle, et al 2005 for explanation). Secondly, employment relationships require a "working through" of issues and actions rather than an adherence to standard human resource management practices alone. Thirdly, it is the core principles of employment (or "guiding rules" of employment) that guide an employer's willingness and capability to work on the employment relationship and this affects how human resource procedures are used (limit or support the effectiveness of HR tools). These guiding rules are based in beliefs, attitudes and values and are difficult to change, but can directly impact employment outcomes.

The preceding brief review of intervention approaches would indicate little attention on change processes for improving employment. The next section reviews the contribution that learning approaches could make to improving interventions in employment. Learning can be viewed as a fundamental process for managing change (Beckhard & Pritchard, 1992) and in this way is seen to offer insight into improving interventions.

### **Social theoretical foundations for learning interventions**

Habermas (1984) argues that all human activity can be differentiated into work (purposive rational action) and communicative action (social and cultural life governed by socially constructed norms). In his theory of communicative action Habermas advocates that communicative practices need to be cognisant of not only the external or empirical world, but also the social world of norms and values and the subjective world of personal feelings, desires and intentions. The primary goal of communicative action is not the achievement of efficiency and successful outcomes, but reaching a mutual understanding in a shared situation (eg. employment). Alvesson and Wilmot (1992) argue that it is too simplistic to suggest that conflicting

matters can be brought into the open and resolved through dialogue. They counter that it is language that produces and reproduces the world-taken-for granted, thereby giving priority to certain (unrecognised) interests. This presents a dilemma for employment relationships and change in employment – given the centrality of dialogue in relationships and the need for equal participation often thwarted by issues of hegemony.

Yet, social interaction leading to action and change and the importance of discourse for individual and collective learning provides a useful framework for intervention in the farm employment arena. Röling and Wagemakers (1998:12) suggest that transformation in agriculture requires a fundamental change in learning processes (in contrast with the processes of adoption of add-on innovations or practices). Such learning, they suggest, can be facilitated (fostering voluntary change in behaviour through communication) and can be seen as a mechanism for change – at the individual level (eg. learning by employee and employer), at the group level (eg. employers and employees) and at the level of industry (eg. farmers, employees and interveners).

### ***Individual learning***

Learning research has typically focused on the cognitive processes that individuals use to acquire and manipulate information. Individual learning is characterised as a grasping of information and the transformation of this information by experimentation or reflection. Kolb (1984) proposed a typology for categorising learners, based on the choices that they made about their preferences for acquiring and using information. Experiential learning, however, tends to treat knowledge like a commodity, and the individual is depicted in static terms. Therefore, for individual employers and employees, learning about employment and their actions within the employment realm may be facilitated through intervention. However, it can be seen that unless this is placed within the context of their employment relationship and involves the perspective of others in the relationship, limited learning and change may result.

Currently, the “learning” emphasis by the dairy industry appears to have been on “packaging” HRM practices from the business world into employer training programs. From the learning and intervention literature, it would appear that this approach does not help explain how those skills are put into action on farms. It is at the level of the relationship (interface of employee and employer) that skills are enacted, so to be effective research and intervention would appear to need to operate beyond the individual.

### ***Group learning***

Situated learning theory (SLT) offers an alternative approach to the study of individual learning (Lave and Wenger, 1990). Lave and Wenger argue that learning as it normally occurs is a function of the activity, context and culture in which it is situated. Social interaction is a critical component of situated learning; learners become involved in a "community of practice" which embodies certain beliefs and behaviours to be acquired. According to SLT the activity (not the individual) is the unit of analysis. This constructivist<sup>1</sup> theory stresses the collaborative efforts of

---

<sup>1</sup> Constructionism is a social theoretical position that suggests reality is created in the discourse of, and negotiations among, people as social actors (Crotty, 1998; Charmaz, 2000)

groups of learners, as sources of learning. In recent years, learning within groups as well as learning by groups, is stressed (Argyris, 1990, Boonstra and Vink, 1996). The significance of social learning fosters the conceptualisation of groups of learners as "critical learning systems".

This literature hints at the importance of group-based learning interventions. This would suggest that groups of employers and employees working in the context of their employment relationships might collaboratively help each other's practice. However, in line with the arguments of critical thinkers such as Alvesson and Wilmot (1992), such group learning would require a critical review of tightly held beliefs and values that may limit learning or further reinforce negative behaviours or outcomes in the employment context (eg. Challenge to the guiding rules of employment that may be hindering employment change). Boonstra and Vink (1996) concur, suggesting that the study of innovation often neglects the development of learning capacities. They argue that learning capacities are needed for successful innovation and, while participatory development approaches give way to learning, they argue that this often allows participants to fall back to conventional and fragmented solutions in their thoughts and deeds – when innovation and completely new ideas are needed. It could be suggested that this is the very issue at the heart of employment change.

### ***Social learning – learning as an industry***

Pretty (1998) suggests that effective policy should seek to bring together a range of actors and institutions for creative interaction and joint learning, and Woodhill and Roling (1998: 47) call for "...more creative, forward thinking and socially engaging processes of change (in environmental management)". They refer to the process of social change, cultural transformation and institutional development necessary (to achieve the integrating of creative capacities of people) as "social learning". They call for new platforms and processes for facilitating social learning because it allows for change to emerge as actors "change their minds" through interaction and dialogue with others. Social learning pays particular attention to how learning processes can be facilitated and enhanced through appropriate institutional and policy contexts (op cit: 53-54). Groups of practitioners are particularly important, for it is only within groups that social interaction and conversation can take place.

Employment relationships at the farm level occur in a continuum of change and uncertainty. The perspective provided by social learning is that it is the social group that "learns" their way out of problematic situations (Röling and Wagemakers, 1998). In the employment change arena, third parties (advisers, industries, governments) are seen as necessary participants in the change process. This suggests that for issues of employment relationships, although there are economic imperatives influencing labour markets and employment decisions, there are still processes of agency of social actors that mean learning can occur for improvement. Learning approaches would appear to offer much promise for change in employment issues, but how they might be used and supported is a new field, that potentially holds the key for broadening the boundaries of intervention in the employment domain.

This literature hints at the possibilities for improvement through the interaction between people in the organisations that intervene in employment and the farm employers and employees learning together to improve employment. Such "learning interventions" are designed to support a relatively permanent change in behaviour

amongst a social group. However the extent to which such interventions offer a breakthrough in improving employment is not well understood and this presents a serious gap in knowledge.

The remainder of the article reports on research into two different forms of learning interventions and their contribution to improvement in employment relationships.

### **Research method and data analysis**

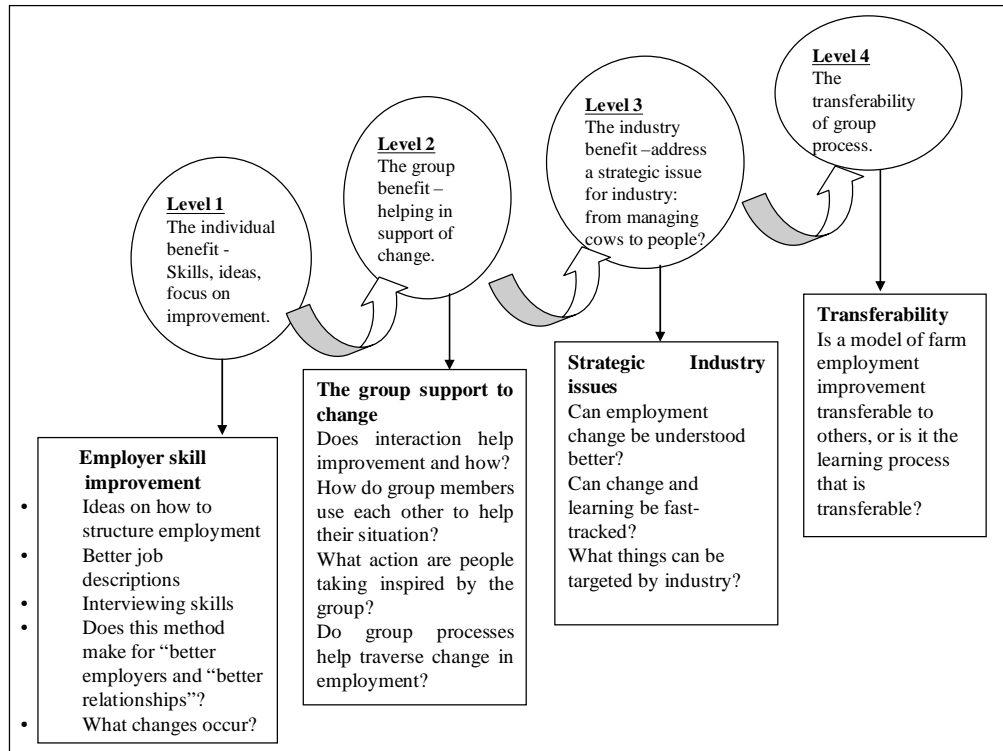
The need to evaluate the role of learning interventions in supporting improved employment requires a methodology that permits the study of the learning interventions in real time and is able to capture change in employment practice, employment relationships and employment attitudes and beliefs.

Qualitative methods offer the best way to research change. Two main approaches were used in this research: action research and participant observation. Action research is a methodology in the social sciences whereby action (change) and research (explanation, understanding) are integrated within a planned intervention (Whyte, 1991; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000). The parallel effort of action to improve employment and documented research to understand change was the approach used. Participant observation is research in which the researcher immerses themselves in a social setting for an extended period of time, observing behaviour, listening to what is said in conversation and asking questions. The method is strongly linked to ethnography (Bryman, 2001). In this research, the researcher observed, documented and participated in discussions and activities of the group members as they learnt about and took action in employment.

Two case studies of learning interventions are analysed for this article. The case studies were located in Gippsland, Victoria, Australia, east of the state capital city, Melbourne. This region contains over 2300 dairy farms employing an estimated 350 employees (not including sharefarmers) (ACIRRT, 2004a). Each case study is described outlining the background to the particular learning intervention, the activities involved, the role of the group facilitators and researcher, the changes that occurred and general findings in relation to the learning interventions contribution to employment change. These findings were generated from the analysis of the content and processes involved in group discussions and changes reported on individual farms. The data from participant observation was text based (researcher notes) and was analysed by coding of the text into themes derived from the research questions:

1. How did the learning intervention contribute to individual, group and industry change in employment (The questions are diagrammatically represented in Figure 1)
2. Can learning interventions close the gap between “intention” to improve employment and “action” (Employment relationship level)
3. What is the role of support services in supporting change from intention to action amongst employers and employees (Dairy industry level).

**Figure 1:** Hierarchy of purposes for group learning interventions (and key research questions).



## Results

### Case 1: Employer learning group

#### *Background and description of the learning intervention*

A local rural services manager recruited twelve farm employers (representing 8 farms) on behalf of the researcher. The farmers were interested in being part of a group to address their employment issues. The group provided an environment in which employers could closely examine their employment issues, reflect on them and enact change. A verbal agreement between the group and the researcher on group functioning and activities was established. The farmers wanted to address practical improvement of labour issues for their own situations, and to gain ideas from one another. The participants understood the purpose of the research was to explore the processes of improvement and for the researcher to observe, question and document group members discussions, actions in trying to improve, and reflections on results. Participants received a copy of the research statement and ethics procedures. Details relating to confidentiality and use of the data were discussed with participants, including use of pseudonyms to describe participants in any documentation of the research. Characteristics of farm employer participants and their farms and employment situation are described in Table 1 (using pseudonyms).

**Table 1:** Characteristics of participants involved in the action research group

<b>Membership of the employer action research group</b>
<b>Jason and Rachael</b> milk 350 cows and have two full time employees
<b>Ben and Andrea</b> milk 550 cows and have three full time employees and some casuals
<b>Tom and Maureen</b> milk 500 cows and have two full time employees
<b>Mathew</b> milks 300 cows and has changed from a sharefarming couple to two full time employees
<b>Andrew</b> milks 950 cows and has just changed from multiple sharefarmers to employees
<b>Don</b> milks 1300 cows on two farms and has nine employees across the farms
<b>Bob</b> milks 620 cows and has three full time employees
<b>Mick and Elaine</b> milk 1100 cows on three farms and have 5 full time employees

### *Activities of the group*

The group met nine times over 16 months from November 1999-March 2001. Group participants planned their focus and activities for employment improvement, facilitated by the researcher. The group decided to use one of its members going through employment change as a focus for their efforts. Topics included: Labour structures, job descriptions, advertising, interviewing, induction, reviews. At times the group used outside expertise (employment consultants) to help in particular topic areas. Between the meetings, they enacted particular learning's or ideas generated from the group at the previous meeting. At the following meeting they reported back on what had happened and on reflections or generalisations they had made about their actions. In this way, the learning intervention involved not just "standard" human resource management techniques but group process activities (i.e. questioning and challenging each other, learning from members about their employment relationships and supporting each others ideas and actions for change).

Each group member planned, applied and reflected on aspects of their own employment situation and reported improvement in employment outcomes (reduced incidence of turnover, greater understanding of employees needs, greater willingness to value employment relationships and different outcomes that employment relationships offer, and, in some instances, changed the employers "guiding rules" of employment:

*Ben: "I wonder if we look at last year – we weren't prepared to ask them (employees) 'why are you leaving' we said: ' just go'. Now we are saying to ourselves well we want you to stay - how can we make you stay – or how can we offer you to stay...Our perceptions as employers today ...all of us has gone around that corner – we were confronted with major movement (of employees) and even though we probably didn't want to talk about it then – we are now seeing we don't want that to happen this year – so lets try and make it sweet..."*



### ***Role of the facilitator/researcher***

The researcher encouraged reflection on action and acted as a critical observer. Despite this 'facilitation role', group participants themselves directed the group process and content of sessions. The researcher encouraged decisions that led to individual action in employment - rather than group participants just talking about improvement or problems, without action. Further, the researcher was concurrently involved in research to understand more about employment relationships in their own right. Findings from this work were used within the group activities to encourage reflection on employment relationship processes of relevance to their own employment issues (see Nettle, et al 2005).

### ***Change in employment***

Change in employment practice (action on farm) and in employment culture questioning and learning (within the group) about employment practice were observed. There were three main areas of change:

1. Change in the level of questioning toward the performance of the employment relationship:

*Ben: "...define for me [what you meant by] more responsibility [for your employees]. Does it mean [them being able to] make decisions or was it to increase [their] workload?"*

*Tom: "...[and] what do you think they thought responsibility was? They said they wanted more responsibility – do you think they got what they wanted?"*

*Andrew: "I don't know – I'll be interested to sit down and talk with them about it."*

Here, employers indicate their need to understand how their actions are being interpreted by employees and are being held accountable for how their actions are being interpreted.

2. Change in expectations of one another's performance as employers:

*Ben (discussing Mick and Elaine's choices): "... wouldn't you be better at doing that [managing the new employees]?"*

*Mathew: "...you've taken the easy way out by [giving someone else that responsibility]."*

*Andrew: "...I think you are at a point where you've probably got to plan what you are going to do for next year – because you just can't keep on keeping on like you are going."*

Here, employers reveal their thinking through the implications for employers and employees of different employer responses and encourage one another to change.

3. Change in understanding of how to build employment relationships through communication and "watching" employment relationships

*Rachael: "...what we learnt out of going through this (a review of employment with their employees) was that we have to learn to explain things clearer..."*

*Mathew: "...we are very happy with the way things have gone...to try and make sure that the honeymoon didn't run out too quickly, even though in the job description we had said that they were in charge of the cows seven days a week, ...we have tried to go out and do...Friday and Saturday morning milking...so I think we've built up a bit of credit in the bank..."*

Group members learnt that communication requires more than just talking. They learnt that taking communication beyond "talk" is about developing a communicative competence for employment.

*Mathew: "...and from watching the employment arrangement it seemed to be working very well and the jobs seemed to be falling apart separately - there didn't seem to be any friction..."*

Group members focussed on "watching" (observing and reflecting on) each other's relationships. They admit that little "watching" of employment relationship "health" was going on previous to the group formation. In this way the learning intervention supported a focus on "watching" to assist groups and individuals in understanding and taking action in their employment relationships.

4. Change to a relationship focus: Through reflection and self-analysis of attitudes to employment and their performance as employers, shifting attitudes in employment away from labour as just a "factor of production" were recorded. This indicates a shift in "guiding rules" of employment (changing the way an employer thinks and interacts with employees, see Nettle *et al*, 2005). Such guiding rules are considered to be hard to change, but have the greatest scope for impacting positively on relationship outcomes. This represents a significant breakthrough for employment interventions.

### ***Processes supporting employment change***

Specific group processes were found to be operating within the learning intervention to support change and improvement in employment practice. These were:

1. Mutual identification: group members identified with each others employment situation. Despite having different employment arrangement and situations, working on employment improvement together and strongly identifying with each others issues supported the engagement of employers in helping each other improve.
2. Accelerated learning: The action taken by group members in improving employment and then having a forum to reflect on those actions (impacts) meant a quicker response to employment issues for participants.
3. Validation of learning: the group plays a mentoring role, either validating and confirming conclusions drawn from experience, or suggesting alternative explanations. The challenge to each other (rather than validation) was important for confronting strongly held beliefs about employees, for instance, yet in a supportive environment.

4. Coping with change: the group developed capacity to identify key points in transition involved in employment relationships and early warning signals for employment change.

### ***Discussion – Case 1***

Employer group learning interventions that place central importance on the learning process for supporting change appears central to effective intervention in employment. This is because such approaches support:

- Understanding of employment relationships and give meaning to employers actions in employment - rather than 'going through the motions' of human resource management procedures.
- New action (change) and reflection on outcomes from this action inspires continued improvement.
- Provide synergy between group learning and individual learning: the group learns as does the individual in the group in improving employment performance

However, successful learning interventions require challenging facilitation not just passive support to a group process, further, this is made difficult by employers often not able to articulate what improvement they are seeking for employment (where to start? questions). This is important as a commitment to new action (and to the group learning process through time) is important for successful learning interventions. The learning process is repeatable and further reinforces the importance of supporting roles in employment relationships. The third party intervention that members had experienced through the group included advice and training. This intervention was placed in the context of the groups' focus and activities. So the interveners, who assisted the group on employment topics, supported change, but it was the group action and reflection that instigated change.

## **Case 2: Employer-employee learning groups**

### ***Background and description of the learning intervention***

Three groups, each of 5 to 6 farm employer-employee units met six times between October 2003 and May 2004. Overall, 32 employers and their employees (representing 15 businesses) were involved. The groups met as part of a regional employment project<sup>2</sup>. The project was designed to support dairy employers and their employees in their current working relationship and develop their own guidelines for future working relationships and careers. The project sought to improve dairy farm employment relationship performance.

The groups were supported by a professional facilitator and an employment researcher. Group members established a group "contract" at the start that provided the guidelines for group work. Group members were provided with a workbook that offered resource material and action planning guides to support change in

---

<sup>2</sup> The "Innovation in employment" project was initiated by GippsDairy, an Australian dairy industry regional development program.

employment. The groups began by mapping out the employment process from both employer and employee perspectives and then choosing elements of the process that they wanted to focus on for improvement. Group members were recruited through advertising (brochures about the project and press releases), word of mouth and personal contact between the local regional industry development body and their constituent farmers. Target participants included employers seeking improvement in employment outcomes and those who were able to have their employee with them throughout the project.

Participants tended to include those employers that were confident in the strength of their current employment relationships to involve their employees and also saw value for their employee in being involved. The participants understood the purpose of the research was to explore the processes of improvement in employment relationships and for the researcher to observe, question and document group members discussions, actions in trying to improve, and reflections on results. Participants received a copy of the research statement and ethics procedures. Details relating to confidentiality and use of the data were discussed with participants, including use of pseudonyms to describe participants in any documentation of the research. General characteristics of participants involved in the project are described in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Characteristics of employer and employee participants in the “partnership” group learning intervention

<b>Characteristics of members of the employer-employee “partnership” groups</b>
<b>Employers:</b> Years as an employer: 12 years (range 5-22) Average herd size 450 cows (range: 140-870) Main selection criteria used in choosing an employee: attitude to work, personality, willingness to work, skills.
<b>Their employees:</b> Years in current position: 5.7 (2-15 years) Main factors looked for in a job: good people to work with, good boss who considers needs of employee, pay above award, pay increases offered through time.

### ***Activities of the group***

All group members involved in the partnership groups worked on aspects of the employment process and covered topics on the employment process including: communication, team environment, farm meetings and performance reviews, job descriptions, career planning, and OH&S.

Participants developed their own “action plans” for improving performance of current (and future) employment relationships. Throughout the group activities, employers and employees discussed and documented their own “guide” to how to better meet the needs of everyone in the employment process. These were collated into “Better employment - Guidelines for dairy farm employers and employees – from employers and employees”. Seven important areas of employment were identified:

1. Pre-employment
2. Selecting / choosing each other
3. Working together
4. Communication
5. Business approach
6. Work team environment
7. Ongoing review and feedback

The groups developed guidelines that encompassed the lessons learnt as they worked through employment issues as part of the learning group. These guidelines were built around these seven areas of employment and included things employers and employees thought should be done, what should be avoided and ideas to try. These included lessons under the following elements of the employment process.

### ***Role of the facilitators and researcher***

Each group of employer-employee units were facilitated by an experienced rural change professional, not with specific expertise in human resources. The researcher attended most meetings. Guidelines and ethics for the groups working together were a major feature of group establishment given the sensitivities of employer-employee relations. This included an established process for employers and employees to use if change in employment occurred whilst being involved in the project. Employer and employee discussions, actions and reflections were documented and analysed during the project. This provided insight into processes of improving employment and barriers to employment improvement.

### ***Change in employment***

Changes in employment observed and documented by participants included:

1. Changes to the way prospective employees/employers are found
2. Changes in what people look for in an employee/employer
3. Change in roles on the farm
4. Change in work conditions, pay or employment status
5. Change in employee responsibilities
6. Better job descriptions
7. Improvement in workplace safety management
8. New approaches to day-to-day working relationships
9. Establishment of farm meetings
10. Increased participation of employees in decision making
11. Improved communication
12. Introduction of work contract reviews
13. Introduction of discussions about career progression or promotion.

Overall, the majority of employers were more confident in employing at the end of the project, had increased satisfaction with working relationships and farm team performance despite no overall change in satisfaction amongst employers in their employees work performance (O'Sullivan and Nettle, 2005). Further, employees showed *reduced* satisfaction levels with their job, their relationship with their employer and relationship with others in the farm team. It is hypothesized that employees participating in the project had quite low awareness of employment

relationship processes. The reduced satisfaction indicates a shift in the way they were evaluating the relationship and the job, suggesting their appreciation of what is important to them and being exposed to more tools and employer issues had an impact on how they assessed employment.

### ***Processes supporting (and hindering) employment change***

Despite the employer-employee group learning intervention supporting change and improvement in employment practice, greater insight came from observing factors hindering employers and employees from improving employment relationships. These included:

1. Job factors and relationship factors viewed separately in employment outcomes: Despite participants in the groups being aware of and comfortable with the “relationship” focus of the employment project, “job-factors” (pay, work hours, work conditions, type of work) were viewed (or framed) separately from “relationship-factors” (communication, expectations, performance, contracts, support, personal relating) by employers and employees.

For example, an employee who decided to leave their position through the course of the group cited work hours, pay and responsibility issues (job factors) as being part of their decision to leave whilst praising the “good relationship” they had with their employer (relationship factors). In other cases, employers cited satisfaction with employees work performance whilst expressing dissatisfaction with the quality of the team work on the farm. Yet “job factors” and “relationship” factors are equally important for employment outcomes and are interdependent. Framing employment in this way could be envisaged to impact directly on the ability of a relationship to adapt through change and time (resilience). Group learning processes like that used in this project provide an opportunity to explicitly address job and relationship factor interaction.

2. The gap between intention and action in improving employment: Employment issues are known to be a concern to many farmers. When asked what they expected from the group involvement employers mainly wanted to improve their employment abilities and have better working relationships. Employees wanted to learn more about dairying and improving work relationships. Despite this drive, some employers and many employees found it difficult to take action, despite good intent (action plans). Overall, employers brought more of a sense of responsibility for an outcome from their group involvement compared with employees. This gap between intention and action appears to be driven by three factors:
  - a) Specific and identifiable barriers to taking action. For example: a lack of time to implement management processes; a reinforced negative attitude toward employers/employees and employing; powerlessness to improve (family social structures thwart attempts at change); a lack of desire to appraise self-performance; and, separating “relationship” and “job-factors” (after point 1 above) when viewing employment success.

- b) Tools and processes readily available but not easily implemented on-farm: Employment tools such as job descriptions, interview procedures, farm meeting guides as well as human resource management techniques are relatively readily available to farm employers and employees. Group participants found it difficult to adapt these resources for their own situation and farm and then use processes as a regular part of day-to-day farming practice or as a standard part of the farm management and farm system “calendar”. Employers involved with the groups indicated limited use or intended use of consultants or support people in employment related matters. Further, there was little appreciation of the extent of resources and reference points (information and tools) available to both employers and employees regarding employment.
  - c) Size of workplace: The demands on an employer and employee change with workplace size. For an employer with numerous employees, demands include issues to do with employee inter-relationships, job delineation/specialisation, rostering, work-place hierarchies, and changes to their own job role. In a smaller workplace (eg. single employee) the issues centre around the intensity of one-on-one work and the mix of on-farm roles and jobs. Also, how employees position themselves and negotiate their role and place differs with workforce size. Workplace size impacts the assessment of a need to change (eg “why have a meeting when there is only one employee and we talk all the time?”) and also the perception of the scale of change (eg. “how can I get systems in place and feel in control when I have 8 employees?”).
3. Capacity of employers and employees to work on “the relationship”: Employment management is increasingly becoming one of the prime competencies for sustainable dairy farming. Yet without an increased capacity of both employer and employee to manage through employment these outcomes will not be attained. For instance, an employer with a good track record of employment and a keen interest in establishing standard and effective employment processes would still prefer not to employ or be involved with employing. In addition, many employees had high expectations of change in the workplace during the project – sometimes not appreciating the employer difficulties.

### ***Discussion-Case 2***

Employer-employee group learning interventions that place central importance on a joint learning process for employers and employees has been shown to support changed practices in employment but potentially is too threatening a learning environment for significant change in beliefs and attitudes toward employment. Such interventions appear most suited to employers and employees ready to change employment practices, and for employers and their employees looking for new opportunities for growth and development. However, such interventions do support the development of a joint appreciation of employment needs and expectations and an awareness of “the other side” for both employers and employees. As such, some joint interaction (rather than separate learning interventions for employers and employees) is warranted.

Based on the findings from this case study a framework to assess an employer or employees “readiness to change” employment action was developed. Such a

framework could help identify those farm employers and employees most likely to benefit from such interventions.

### ***Readiness to change employment***

For employers, an increased readiness to change employment practice includes; willingness to appraise employment performance; a large current workforce – or expanding workforce; looking for tools and systems to put in place for their farm; views employment issues as “within their control”; has a desire to seek out or modify tools available to support their employment practices. A reduced readiness to change employment practice by employers may be indicated by; a small current workforce; multiple generations of family involved in employing; suggest that “good personal relationships with employees” are enough for employment success; have large time and financial pressures (desperation), and see employment issues as an industry problem – outside their control.

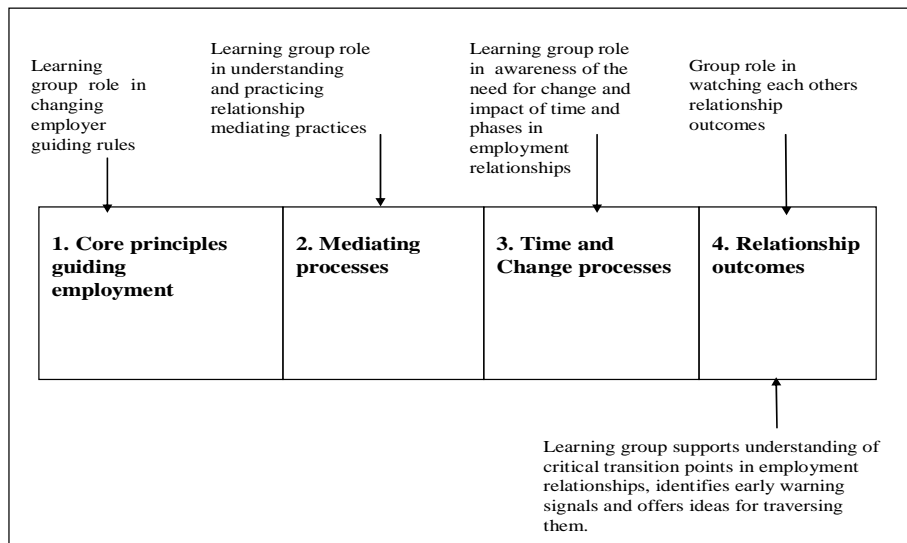
For employees, an increased readiness to change employment practice includes; a willingness to appraise performance and see their own role in employment outcomes and have a sense of where they would like to progress in their employment. A decreased readiness to change employment practice is indicated by a lack of willingness to appraise performance as an employee – placing all responsibility on employer.

### **Cross-case analysis**

Learning interventions such as described through the case studies appear to improve employment relationships by supporting change in guiding rules of employment, supporting understanding and use of key mediating practices, providing support to cope with change and providing a forum for exploring desired employment outcomes. This is demonstrated diagrammatically in Figure 2.

**Figure 2:** Processes in employment relationships (developed from previous research (see Nettle, et al, 2005) and the role of learning interventions in improvement





In this way, such learning interventions contribute to improvement in employment relationships at the individual level (for employers and employee's) and the group level (collective improvement). Further, the learning process itself holds promise for industry level improvement if such interventions were developed with a critical mass of employers and employees.

Although these learning interventions have produced promising results and pointers for future interventions, some limitations of the process should be noted:

The group process in the project went only part of the way in addressing the gap between intention and action. It demonstrates why change is so difficult for an industry to achieve. Although action planning and a suitable learning environment can help employment participants prioritise what needs to be done and support change in beliefs and attitudes, implementing action plans requires a different form of support. The barriers identified through the research need to be understood in the context of intervention and support approaches.

Third parties (advisers, industry groups and government) need to develop tools and support approaches to reduce the gap between intent and action. These need to be at two levels: 1. Employer and employee tools (eg. key employment concepts that adequately describe and explain their farm's employment relationships and allow understanding of the form of action they need to take to improve current and future relationships), and 2. Intervention tools (eg. third party awareness of key concepts and group processes that support learning, tools for integrating job and relationship factors, mentoring tools for employers and employees to assess their employment performance). Identified in this research is a framework to assess readiness to change, this provides one step toward understanding the heterogeneity in employers and employees for the tailoring of intervention approaches. The research suggests that the learning interventions provide a link between such farmer tools and intervention tools. Further it provides a way for supporting organisations, employers and employees to align their needs and activities for improvement in farm employment.

## **Conclusion**

This article has reported on research into learning interventions as catalysts for improvement in employment. The research suggests that the needs of farm employers and employees can be managed as a learning process and that learning interventions represent a significant step forward for change at individual, group and industry levels as well as offering a platform for alignment of third party support for improvement.

Although this research was conducted in the context of employment relationships in farm businesses, it is conceivable that such learning interventions are appropriate across the small business sector.

Further research focusing on interventions in employment is warranted. This research would need to examine the role of advisers and other third parties in supporting employment change and the sustainability of improvement or the long-term impacts on employment relationships arising from involvement in learning interventions and third party input.

## References

ACIRRT (2004a), *Dairy employment for the future: The Strategy*. Report for United Dairyfarmers of Victoria (UDV). Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training, July, University of Sydney.

ACIRRT (2004b), *Dairy employment for the future: A survey of south western Victorian Dairy Farms*. Report for United Dairyfarmers of Victoria (UDV). Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training, July, University of Sydney.

Alvesson, M. and Willmott, H. (1992), *Critical management studies*, Sage Publications, London, UK.

Argyris, C. (1990), *Overcoming organisational defences*, Allyn-Bacon, Needham, MA, USA.

Beckhard R. & Pritchard W. (1992). *Changing the Essence – The art of creating and leading fundamental change in organizations*. San Francisco. Jossey-Bass

Boonstra, J. J. and Vink, M. J. (1996), 'Technological and organizational innovation: A dilemma of fundamental change and participation', *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 5, 351-375.

Bodi, A., Maggs, G., and Gray, J. (1999), *Managing skills transitions in the Dairy Industry*. Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business, Melbourne.

Bodi, A. and Maggs, G. (2001), *The Dairy Career and Employment Strategy (DCES)*. Centre for Workplace Culture Change, RMIT, Melbourne. Project funded by the Dairy Research and Development Corporation (DRDC).

Bryman A (2001). *Social Research Methods*. Oxford University Press, New York

Charmaz, K. (2000), *Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods*, in *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd Edition), (ed. N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln), Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, USA.

Crotty, M. (1998), *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, Australia.

Dairy Australia (2005), *Dairy Situation and Outlook - 2005*. Dairy Moving Forward, Melbourne. ([www.dairymovingforward.org.au](http://www.dairymovingforward.org.au))

DETYA, (2001), Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra. <http://www.detya.gov.au> (June, 2001).

Edkins, R.J. (2003). *Dairying and employment in the Amuri district, North Canterbury 1983-2002*. Masters of Commerce (Agricultural). Lincoln University.

Habermas, J. (1984), *The theory of communicative action*, Beacon Press, Boston, USA.

Kemmis, S. and McTaggart, R. (2000), '*Participatory action research*', in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, (ed. N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln) Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, USA.

Kolb, D. (1984), *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, USA.

Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1990), *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

MurrayDairy (1998), *Dairy labour project: Final report*, MurrayDairy: A Regional Development Board of the Dairy Research and Development Corporation, Kyabram, VIC.

Nettle, R., Paine, M. and Petheram, J. (2005). The Employment Relationship – a conceptual model developed from farming case studies. *New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations* 30 (2) 19-36.

O'Sullivan, J and Nettle, R (2004) *Innovation in Employment: A project to support innovative working relationships between employers and employees - Final Report*. GippsDairy, A Regional Board of Dairy Australia. Warragul, Victoria.

Pretty, J. (1998), '*Supportive policies and practice for scaling up sustainable agriculture*', in *Facilitating sustainable agriculture: participatory learning and adaptive management in times of environmental uncertainty*, (ed. N. Röling and M.A.E. Wagemakers), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, U.K.

Röling, N. and Wagemakers, M. A. E. (ed.) (1998) *Facilitating sustainable agriculture: participatory learning and adaptive management in times of environmental uncertainty*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

Whyte, W. F. (ed.) (1991) *Participatory action research*, Sage Publications, Newbury Park, CA, USA.

Woodhill, J. and Roling, N. (1998), '*The second wing of the eagle: the human dimension in learning our way to more sustainable futures*', in *Facilitating Sustainable Agriculture. Participatory Learning and Adaptive Management in Times of Environmental Uncertainty*, (ed. N. Röling, M.A.E. Wagemakers), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, U.K.