

Employee Retention in the Red Meat Industry

A Best Practice Model based on Literature Review,
Stakeholder Perspectives and Current Industry Data

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1.0 Executive Summary

The purpose of this project was to develop a theoretical model representing best practice for retention of employees within the Australian meat processing industry. Specifically, the project objectives were as follows:

- ◆ Review the current literature on the factors influencing employee retention in the Australian meat processing industry
- ◆ Gather stakeholder perspectives and experience on the factors influencing employee retention in the Australian meat processing industry
- ◆ Establish the current state of employee retention/drop off in the meat industry at 3, 6 and 12 month time frame
- ◆ Synthesise current research and stakeholder experience into a testable hypotheses
- ◆ Generate a theoretical testable model on industry best practice aimed at increasing employee retention

A narrative literature review was conducted of relevant Australian and international databases. The key themes identified included:

- ◆ Opportunities for training and advancement
- ◆ Non-pecuniary benefits
- ◆ Communication, management and human resources practices
- ◆ The person to job fit
- ◆ Perceptions of alternative employment options
- ◆ Negative affectivity and job stigma
- ◆ Perceptions of alternative employment options
- ◆ Job satisfaction

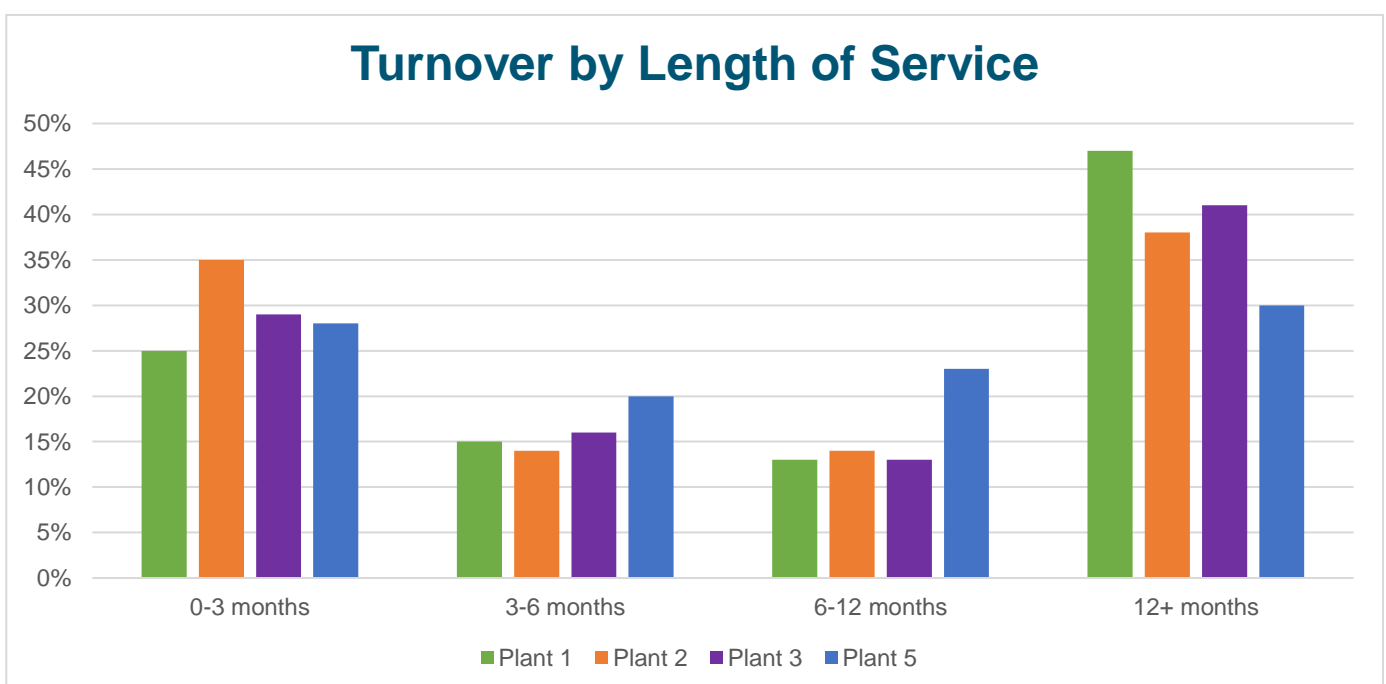
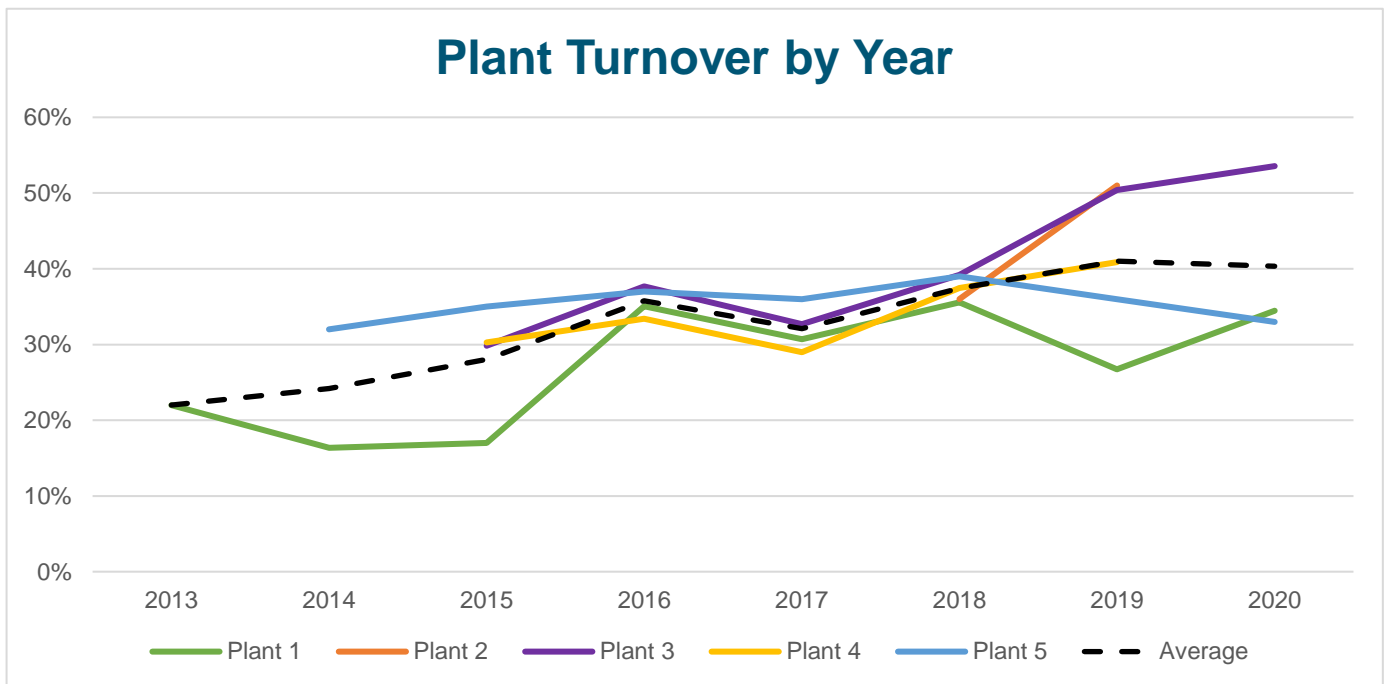
Key themes were used to inform stakeholder interviews which were conducted at three plants and including the perspectives of plant managers, human resources and recruitment staff, occupational health and safety staff, floor supervisors and floor workers. These responses, along with the narrative literature review, were synthesised into a series of recommendations for improving employee retention in the Australian meat processing industry. Suggestions are presented in relation to candidate onboarding; training practices; internal communication; non-pecuniary benefits and reward and recognition; competing employers; job factors; and HR practices. Refer to Section 7: Conclusions and Recommendations (Table 4).

Data was gathered from five plants, representing a total of 10,286 terminations across 28 plant-years. Average annual turnover across the 28 plant-years recorded was 35% and ranged from 16% to 54%. The 95% confidence interval of this estimate is 18% to 51% total turnover per year.

On average, one-third of employees terminated within their first three months of employment within the Australian meat processing industry. An average of 39% of employees terminated after 12 months of service (as low as one-third but as high as one-half in the sampled plants), meaning that 61% of employees do not maintain their employment to the one-year milestone. The remaining employees are split evenly between the 3 to 6-month and 6 to 12-month time frame.

Of the 61% of employees who do not maintain their employment to one-year, approximately half of them leave within three months. Of these, half leave within thirty days. These data suggest a potential shock of entry causing new workers to leave their jobs shortly after commencing employment within the industry, and a worthwhile focal point for addressing this sharp turnover rate by length of service.

Future research should focus on more deeply understanding employee attitudes related to the meat industry and their reasons for staying in the industry, as well as exploring the way plants can improve capture and analysis of employee exit data.



2.0 Introduction

Employee retention within the Australian meat processing industry has been a source of frustration due to the economic and productivity burden for at least the last 30 years (MATFA, 1990). Annual turnover rates have been reported from 37% to 90% with an average of 58%, and associated costs are estimated to be between \$650k to \$1.3m for a medium sized plant, and \$2500 to \$5000 per employee (Cordery, 2006). Despite these issues, there has been little industry-wide purposeful investigation into the nature, prevalence and severity of the factors driving this problem. Although recommendations have been made, based on previous industry papers, the lack of an actionable framework from which plants can base strategy for improving retention suggests a gap in the way this problem has been addressed.

The purpose of this project was to develop a theoretical testable model representing best practice for retention of employees within the Australian meat processing industry. An understanding was gained of the pertinent factors related to employee retention/turnover in the meat processing industry (or industries which might be related to the same) based on three avenues of inquiry:

1. A narrative review of relevant published literature
2. Qualitative interviews with industry stakeholders
3. Analysis of employee turnover data from processing plants to establish an estimate of current industry baseline turnover rates.

AMPC member red meat processing plants were invited to submit human resources data regarding their annual staff turnover from the last five years in order to establish current industry baseline rates for benchmarking. Additionally, they were invited to take part in stakeholder interviews. These were semi-structured interviews which aimed to collect perspectives from all levels from the plant manager to floor workers, to add context for factors taken from the literature review as well as provide opportunity to document factors which the literature review may have missed.

3.0 Project Objectives

- ◆ Review the current literature on factors influencing employee retention in the Australian meat processing industry
- ◆ Gather stakeholder perspectives and experience on factors influencing employee retention in the meat industry
- ◆ Establish the current state of employee retention/drop off in the meat industry at 3, 6 and 12 month time points
- ◆ Synthesise current research and stakeholder experience into a testable hypotheses
- ◆ Generate a theoretical testable model on industry best practice aimed at increasing employee retention

4.0 Methodology

This project consisted of three parts: a literature review, stakeholder interviews, and collection and analysis of plant turnover data.

4.1: Literature Review

Key databases containing human resource literature (Science Direct, EBSCO, Google Scholar) were searched using keywords “employee retention”, “employee turnover” “meat processing”, “abattoir”, and “manufacturing”. Further sources were found with Google searches which returned some useful industry documents, and a search was made of the Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA) website which produced other relevant documents. WHA wish to acknowledge the assistance and generosity of Roderick Glass from Response Consulting Group, who was kind enough to pass on several documents obtained during a previous literature review.

These documents were scanned for the presence of information related to employee retention generally or the meat industry specifically, and appropriate sections summarised in a separate document. The information was organised into two tables – one which sorted the general themes into factors which are positive, negative or neutral (Appendix 1) to eventually assist in developing the questions for interviews in Milestone 3, and another table breaking the factors into common themes (Appendix 2). The important factors and concepts taken from this review can be found in the discussion of this report.

4.2: Stakeholder Interviews

Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with questions derived from factors identified in Milestone 2. Expressions of Interest were collected initially through the AMPC Portal in 2019, however most of these plants, when contacted, ultimately declined participation. Some of these were the result of logistical issues created by the 2020 Australian bushfires as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, Work Healthy Australia (WHA) solicited expressions of interest from their own clients who were AMPC members.

Questions were grouped according to positions within the plants. Those interviewed held positions which were involved in worker recruitment/training (such as human resources and operations managers), supervision (such as floor supervisors and production managers) or support (such as First Aid or OH&S). To facilitate trust and honesty, sites and individual participants were assured confidentiality.

Sites were selected to provide a range of exposures between pertinent variables such as rurality, number of employees, state, and animals processed.

Participant responses were analysed for several features, including:

- ◆ Stakeholders' views on the main barriers to retaining employees, with particular attention paid to congruence or conflict between barriers reported by stakeholders as compared to those identified through the literature review.
- ◆ Stakeholder awareness of relevant factors, and the degree to which these were being actioned and the reasons why/not.
- ◆ Consistency between responses given by floor workers regarding several factors at their workplace, as compared to those responses given by higher level staff.

4.3: Plant Turnover Data Analysis

As part of this project, AMPC members were invited to submit data related to employee turnover from up to the last five years. This invitation was delivered via the AMPC member portal and had been mentioned at various industry events including MINTRAC training events in 2019 as well as AMPC Roadshow events. Many plants who initially expressed interest ultimately declined participation, and again WHA turned to their clients to request turnover data. Data was eventually collected from a total of five plants, representing 10,286 terminations across 28 plant-years. Plants varied greatly in terms of the data they collected and the level of detail with which they were able to extract the data. Summary descriptive statistics are presented in the Project Outcomes section of this report.

5.0 Project Outcomes

5.1: Current rates of turnover in the Australian red meat processing industry

In total, data was collected from a total of five different plants representing a total of 10,286 terminations over 28 plant-years. All plants were assured anonymity and so their results are presented in this report with each plant being designated a number one through five. Plants 1, 2 3 and 5 submitted data which allowed descriptive statistics to be presented related to length of service, and Plants 2 and 3 also included data related to the reasons for termination from employees. These data are presented in the following tables and figures.

Table 1: Characteristics of plants submitting employee turnover data

| | State | Approximate Average Headcount | Years of Turnover Data Submitted | Length of Service Data (Y/N) | Reason for Termination Data (Y/N) |
|----------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Plant 1 | Queensland | 1700 | 8 | Y | N |
| Plant 2 | Queensland | 600 | 2 | Y | Y |
| Plant 3 | Victoria | 1200 | 6 | Y | Y |
| Plant 4 | New South Wales | 1100 | 5 | N | N |
| Plant 5 | Victoria | 480 | 7 | Y | N |

5.1.1: Plant Turnover by Year

Average annual turnover across the 28 plant-years recorded was 35% and ranged from 16% to 54%. The 95% confidence interval of this estimate is 18% to 51%. The estimate from this sample is smaller than previous estimates of an average of 58% turnover with range 37-90% (MATFA, 1990).

All plants showed a general upward trend in turnover across the years recorded, except for Plant 5 which was the most stable of the plants recorded. Plant 5 demonstrated a difference between the highest (39%) and lowest (32%) annual turnover of only 7% across the seven years their data was available.

Comparing across time periods, the data recorded from strata 2015-2017 demonstrated an average turnover rate of 32%, compared to an average of 40% for 2018-2020. This supports in principle a general increase in turnover in this sample during that time period, however closely statistical analysis of the data provides for some caution in this assumption due to wide overlap in confidence intervals between the 2015-17- and 2018-20-time frames (21-43% and 25-55% respectively)

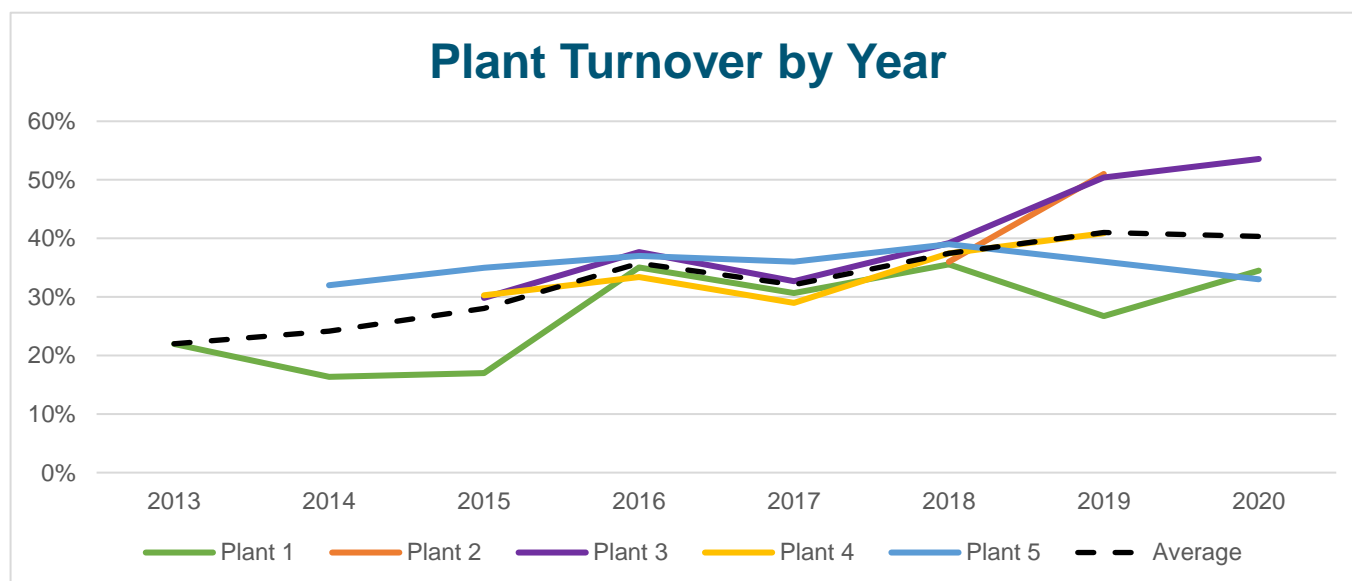
Table 2: Plant turnover by year

| | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | Average |
|----------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|---------|
| Plant 1 | 22% | 16% | 17% | 35% | 31% | 36% | 27% | 34% | 27% |
| Plant 2 | | | | | | 36% | 51% | | 44% |
| Plant 3 | | | 30% | 38% | 33% | 39% | 50% | 54% | 41% |
| Plant 4 | | | 30% | 33% | 29% | 37% | 41% | | 34% |
| Plant 5 | | 32% | 35% | 37% | 36% | 39% | 36% | 33% | 35% |
| Average | 22% | 24% | 28% | 36% | 32% | 37% | 41% | 40% | |

Average 2015-2017: 32%
(n = 4257)

Average 2018-2020: 40%
(n = 5117)

Figure 1: Plant turnover by year



5.1.2: Turnover by Length of Service

Length of service data was available for four of the five plants. Data were analysed with respect to determining the proportion of staff who terminated with 3, 6, 12 and 12 plus month timeframes. Patterns were consistent between the four plants analysed, with a U-shaped distribution amongst the length of service categories.

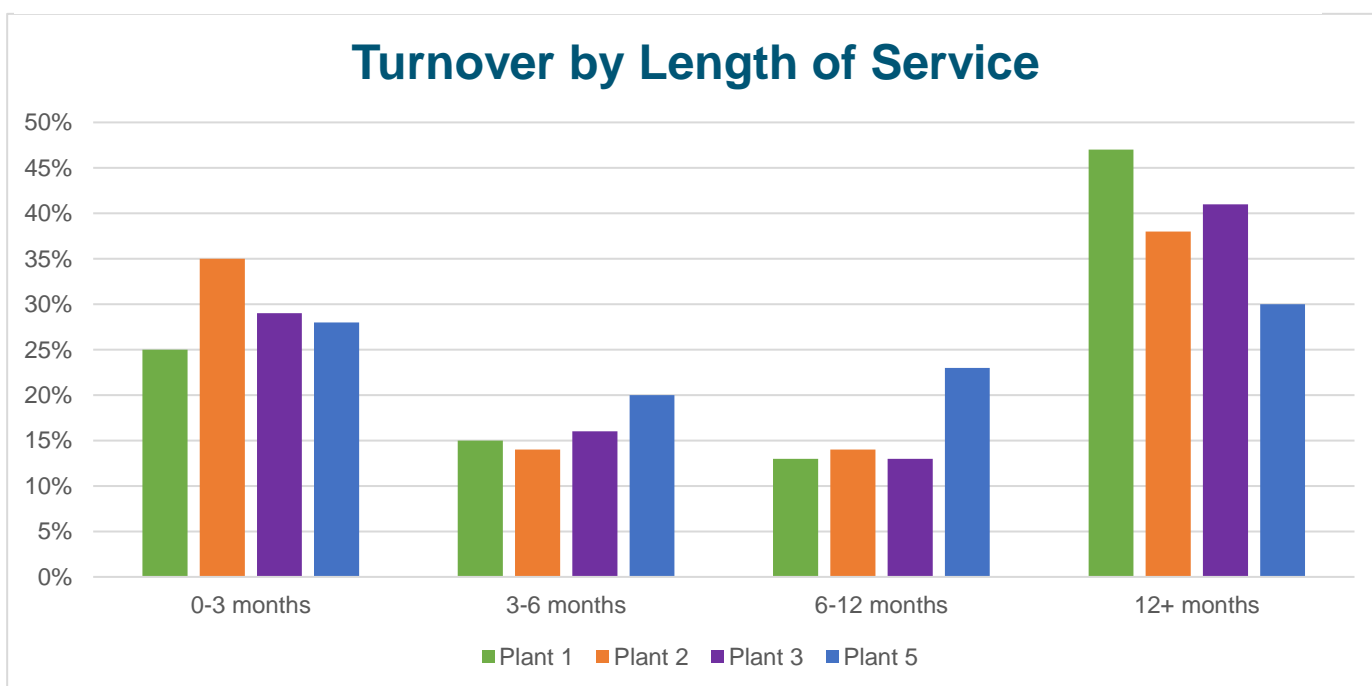
On average, one-third of employees terminated within their first three months of employment within the Australian meat processing industry. An average of 39% of employees terminated after 12 months of service (as low as one-third but as high as one-half in the project sample), meaning that 61% of employees did not maintain their employment to the one-year milestone. The remaining employees were split evenly between the 3 to 6-month and 6 to 12-month time frame.

Of the 61% of employees who did not maintain their employment to one-year, approximately half leave within three months. Of these, half of them leave within thirty days. This suggests a potential shock of entry causing new workers to leave their jobs shortly after commencing employment within the industry.

Table 3: Plant turnover proportion by length of service

| | Length of Service | | | |
|----------------|-------------------|------------|-------------|------------|
| | 0-3 months | 3-6 months | 6-12 months | 12+ months |
| Plant 1 | 25% | 15% | 13% | 47% |
| Plant 2 | 35% | 14% | 14% | 38% |
| Plant 3 | 29% | 16% | 13% | 41% |
| Plant 5 | 28% | 20% | 23% | 30% |
| Average | 29% | 16% | 16% | 39% |

Figure 2: Plant turnover proportion by length of service



5.1.3: Reasons for Termination

Data concerning reasons for termination were available from two plants, representing a total of 2744 employee terminations. Plants categorised reasons for termination differently from each other, which makes direct proportional comparisons difficult. Resignation was the most popular recorded category for each plant, followed by job abandonment. Abandonment accounted for ~20% of terminations across both plants. One percent of all observed terminations were due to retirement.

Figure 3: Reasons for termination: Plant 2

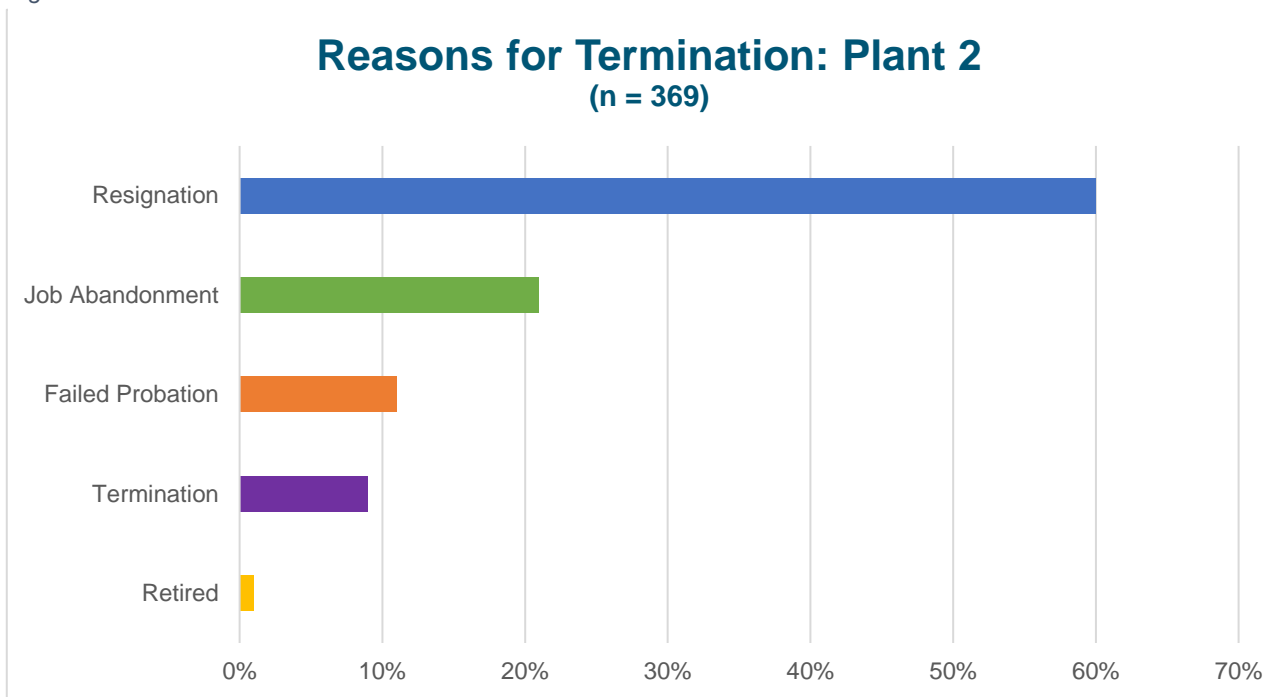
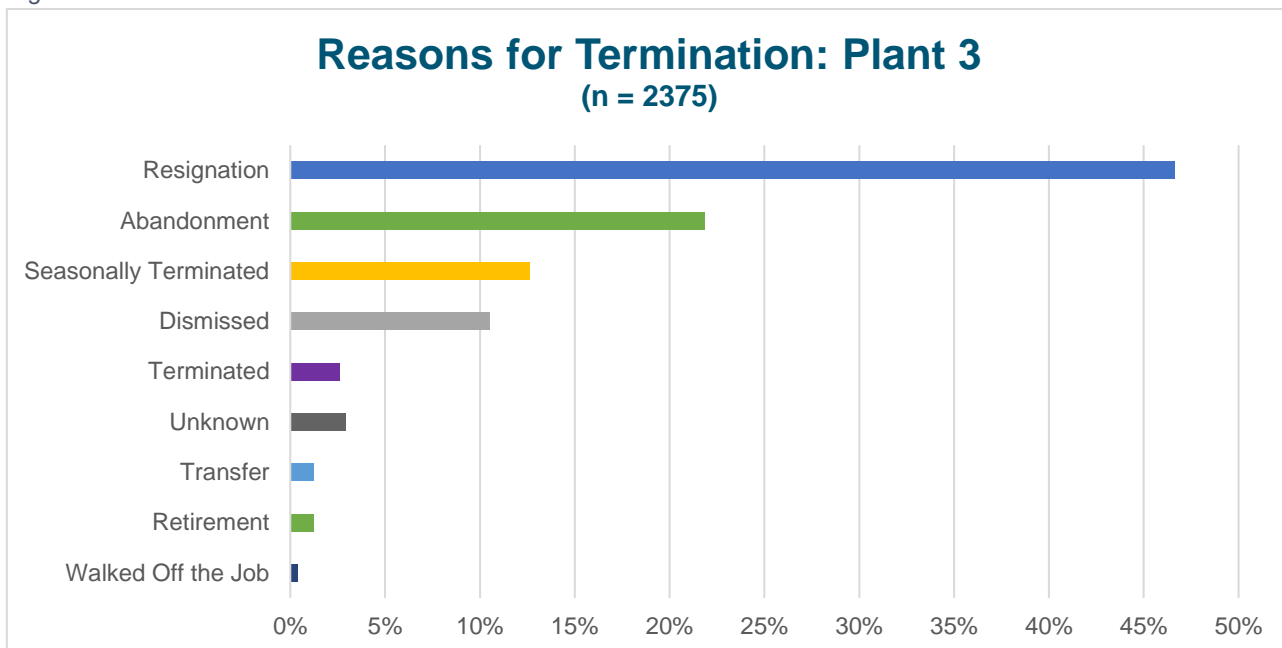


Figure 4: Reasons for termination: Plant 3



5.1.4: Reasons for Termination by Length of Service

Resignations were the most common recorded reason for termination across all time frames in both plants. Job abandonment was highest in the 0 to 3 month length of service category, accounting for ~10% of total terminations observed in this sample. For Plant 3, employees were slightly more likely to be recorded as “Dismissed” after 12 months of service (5%) compared to before 12 months (4%).

Figure 3: Reasons for termination by length of service: Plant 2

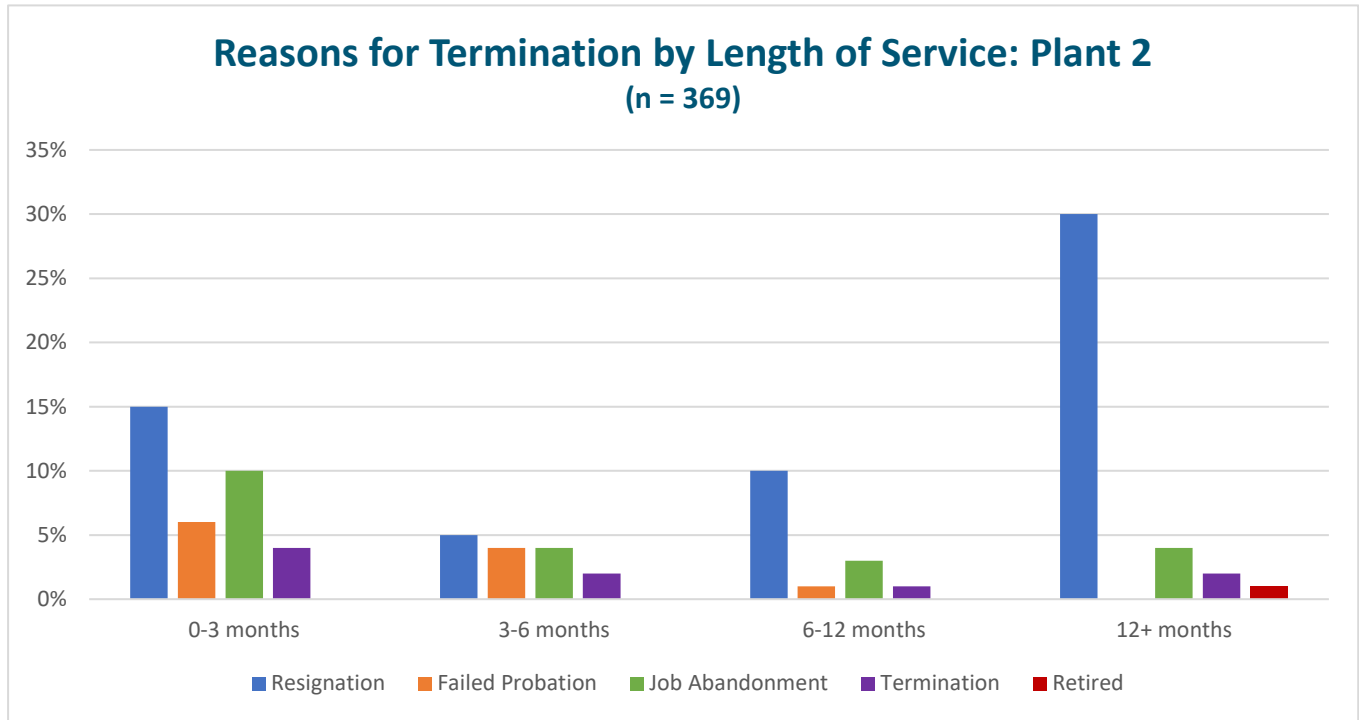
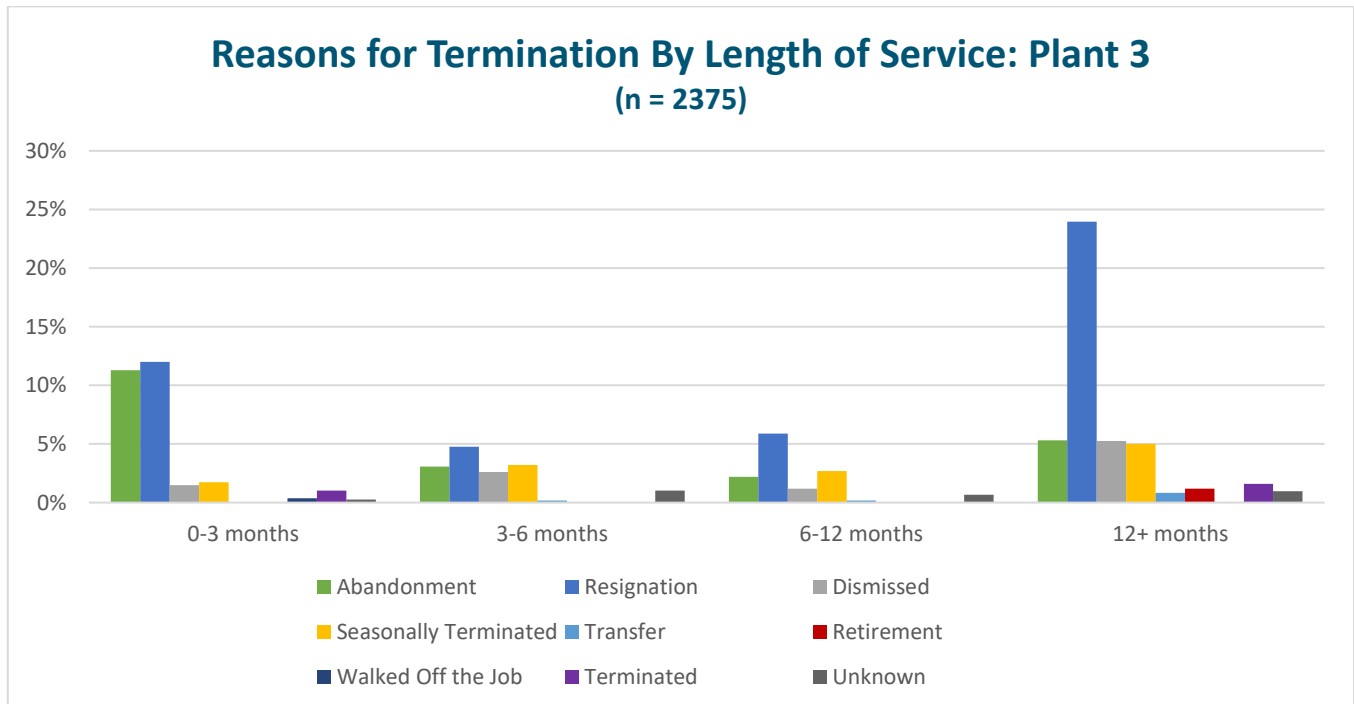


Figure 4: Reasons for termination by length of service: Plant 3



6.0 Discussion

This discussion section includes a summary of the narrative literature review completed for Milestone 2 of this project, as well as a summary of the stakeholder interviews completed for Milestone 3. A copy of the questions used for the semi-structured interviews is available as an appendix (Appendix 3).

6.1: Narrative Literature Review: Summary

The narrative literature review undertaken for this project returned numerous relevant reports and studies which have been commissioned in Australia and overseas over the past thirty years. These include several reports relating specifically the red meat industry as well as non-meat industry reports from which the industry may take valuable lessons. These are summarized here in order to collate and draw attention to specific issues and themes. Presented first is a summary of work related specifically to the Australian meat-processing industry. This is followed by a summary of factors which are broadly divided into workplace-related factors and individual-related factors. It should however be noted that while these factors are presented under separate headings, many of them are interconnected and interdependent.

6.1.1: Literature on the Australian Meat Processing Industry

The most significant work to date comes from an industry report funded by Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA), titled “**Strategies for Improving Employee Retention**” (Cordery, 2006). This project focused on 6 plants with employee numbers ranging from 100 to 900, and included two plants in New South Wales, and one each from Queensland, Victoria, South Australia, and Western Australia. The report estimates annual turnover rates ranging from 37% to 90% (average turnover rate of 58%) across six plants surveyed. The author noted that considerable variability exists in the quality and content of turnover information collected by each plant, which “severely limited the degree to which plants were able to use this information to accurately monitor turnover trends and to diagnose factors underlying poor employee retention. Some plants collected exit interviews, but the information they generated was not regarded as being particularly useful or useable in most cases”.

Cordery (2006) provides a list of worthwhile recommendations for improving employee retention in the meat processing industry. They are:

- Improved collection and analysis of employee turnover data
- Modify the use of exit interviews
- Setting targets and establishing managerial accountabilities with respect to employee retention
- Developing and communicating an ‘employee value proposition’
- Step up community-based activities in relevant labour markets
- Select more rigorously, based on ‘fit’ to the organisation
- Emphasise teamwork and employee engagement
- Train more intensively and broadly
- Increase organisational communication
- Offer employment security guarantees
- Reward based on organisational performance
- Improve job design and working environments.

Cordery also notes that one plant was found to keep good data on voluntary termination of their employees. The common reasons listed for employees voluntarily terminating their employment were:

- Lack of rotation among tasks
- Leaving the town
- Concerns about management and way individuals were treated by management
- Lack of training received on the job
- Concerns about ability to progress through levels
- Dissatisfaction with working hours/shifts
- Ill-health or injury
- Other' reasons (disliked the work, illness in family, commute distance).

Additionally, Cordery lists the following issues of fit (the degree to which an employee feels compatible and comfortable within his or her organisation and environment) as being related to voluntary termination:

- Recruits unsuited and or were unprepared for the type of work
- Initial shock of entry to the industry
- Excessive physical demands
- Culture of harassment
- Lack of support from supervisors and or co-workers
- Lack of employment security
- Lack of career opportunities
- Monotonous work
- Expectations of training and progression not met
- No opportunity to take pride in work and or occupation
- Unsociable hours of work
- Lack of incentives.

A pilot program sponsored by MLA (Perkins, 2005) reported on the influence of a communication skills training program on absenteeism and retention. The author notes that while there was some indication of positive effects, the lack of follow up probably lead to a failure of long-term change. Additionally, it was noted there was possibility of a “two-edged sword effect”, whereby instilling some employees with confidence and skills may have encouraged them to the leave for high paid positions elsewhere. Some concerns were also raised that the program may have raised participant expectations for lateral/upwards movement in their position, and the lack of opportunities 12 months post completion of the program lead to some participants being ready to leave the company. Certainly, there are important lessons to be taken from this program in future training considerations.

A report produced by Monash University (Jerrard, et al., 2008) provides analysis into the social perceptions of working within the meat processing industry and the imperative of turning “jobs into careers” by changing the perceptions of skills and career paths within the industry. The essence of their analysis is captured in their question, “Why be a low paid and poorly regarded meatworker doing a physically and socially “dirty job” when you can be a high paid labourer in the socially and economically well-regarded mining industry, albeit doing a physically dirty job?”. The authors critically review some of the drivers of staff shortages within the meat processing industry and suggest that the industry is experiencing a “labour shortage” rather than a “skills shortage”, as “industry demand for workers has outstripped

the supply of people in the Australia labour market who are willing to do the job at the current low wage and in poor working conditions”.

More recently, a State of the Industry Report from MLA (MLA, 2018) suggested that the industry has adopted several different strategies to attract workers, including:

- Promoting the industry as exciting, diverse, well paid, secure, and flexible.
- Investing in training to upgrade skills and offer advancement paths within the industry.
- Sponsoring overseas workers in the occupation of “skilled meat worker”.

It would be worthwhile conducting research as to the perceptions of current meat process workers to understand the extent to which they view the industry in the light aimed for in the State of the Industry Report, as no such research was uncovered during this literature review.

6.1.2: Workplace Factors

Opportunities for Training and Advancement

The influence of opportunities for training and career development were the most consistently emphasised factor in the employee retention literature. One study noted, “If employees feel they aren’t learning and growing, they feel they are not remaining competitive with their industry peers for promotion opportunities and career advancement. Once top employees feel they are no longer growing, they begin to look externally for new job opportunities” (Kyndt, et al., 2009).

A review conducted in 2011 (Irshad & Afridi, 2011) listed career opportunities as one of the five most important determinants of employee retention, with the remaining four being work environment, work/life balance, organizational justice and existing leave policy. They also found important associations between employee retention and compensation and rewards; job security; training and development; and supervisor support culture in reducing absenteeism, improving retention, and leading to better quality work.

A 2019 study from Brazil (Rodrigues Ataide Silva, et al., 2019) suggested that “training policy is the most important factor in retaining people in organizations”. The authors observed a tendency for non-monetary factors to be ranked generally higher than monetary factors, stating “among the ten highest average items, non-monetary items, such as training, willingness to grow and ascending, prevailed in the first three places of the ranking. ‘Wages and benefits’, the only monetary items in the top 10, appear in fourth and fifth place. These data provide indications that the retention of employees is not determined primarily by remuneration or financial benefits”. The authors drew particular attention to the importance of training opportunities, reporting that “provision of training opportunities was the best punctuated factor, proving to be the main component for retaining people in the company”.

Non-Pecuniary Benefits

Several factors were identified in the literature which highlight the importance of non-pecuniary benefits to employee retention. Smith et al (2004) note that “Retention strategies can take the form of loyalty bonuses, Christmas parties, social activities, games and rewards for suggestions, quality and other performance inducements. These practices are contest based, at the discretion of managers and structured as ‘rewards’”. These authors also report that mid- and/or long-term service rewards appear to be important incentives to combat the gradual reduction of the value of loyalty (by length of service) in the manufacturing sector. This is likely to be especially relevant for the meat-processing industry as the ratio of senior positions (supervisors and above) to floor workers results in there being relatively few positions into which loyal workers can progress. These practices deserve further exploration as they are potentially cost-effective drivers of increased employee retention.

Communication, Management and Human Resources Practices

These factors encompass a range of variables which include recruitment, induction, training, and ongoing management of employees. It is self-evident that if employers could hire people most suited to the job, then retention would improve. Smith et al (2004) note that such freedom to be selective in hiring workers only applies if the employer possesses sufficient inducements – high remuneration, benefits packages, good working conditions, security of employment and strong potential for career development. These authors also highlight the importance of “non-union voice mechanisms” (company councils, employee attitude surveys, teamworking) as being an important mediator of intention to quit. This is supported by Kyndt (2009), who propose that “support, encouragement, respect, and an opportunity to be heard by the direct supervisor enhance employee retention”.

Griffeth and colleagues (Griffeth, et al., 2000) report that various job attitudes modestly predict turnover, with overall job satisfaction being the best predictor of these attitudes. They note however that organisational commitment (the degree to which an employee feels psychologically attached to an organisation) was found to be a better predictor than job satisfaction. Empirical evidence suggests that these factors are mediated by leader-member exchange (the relationship between supervisors and subordinates formed through their workplace interactions) (Wahyu Ariani, 2012). The literature in this space illustrates a complex web of association between these factors.

Kyndt et al (2009) report “a large positive contribution of appreciation and stimulation of the employee to employee retention”, suggesting that employees are more likely to remain in jobs where they feel valued and continually challenged. They cite a study by Walker (Walker, 2001) who identified seven factors which can enhance employee retention:

1. Compensation and appreciation of the performed work
2. Provision of challenging work
3. Chances to be promoted to learn
4. Invitational atmosphere within the organisation
5. Positive relations with colleagues
6. A healthy balance between professional and personal life
7. Good communication

6.1.3: Individual Factors

Person-Job Fit

Job-person fit is a concept from the field of organisational psychology and originates from person-environment fit theory (Caplan, 1987) and is defined as the degree to which the employee is compatible with their occupational role. It is a concept with broad applications in the context of employee retention. Irshad and Afridi (2011) suggest that employees will remain in organisations in which they feel valued, have a sense of pride, and feel able to work to their full potential. Van Knippenberg (Van Knippenberg, 2001) notes the importance of employees being able to identify themselves within a group and contribute to the performance of the organisation as such. A 2017 study points to person-job fit as having an inverse relationship on intention to resign (Covella, et al., 2017), and work-life balance is another recurring theme within this concept which appears consistently in the retention literature (Kyndt et al, 2009; Rodrigues Ataide Silva et al, 2019; Irshad & Afridi, 2011; Cordery, 2006). Lopina et al (2012) note that better access to job information prior to hire may allow newcomers to determine whether they fit the new business, which may save businesses costs associated with training new employees who will not remain long with the business.

Negative Affectivity and Job Stigma

One particularly noteworthy aspect of person-job fit is the somewhat counter-intuitive finding that individuals who are high in negative affectivity (a personality trait in which an individual experiences negative emotions and has poor self-concept) are less likely to resign from “dirty work occupations” (those which are stigmatised through physical, social or moral variables) such as those within the meat processing industry (Lopina, et al., 2012). Lopina et al (2012) note that “individuals high in negative affectivity are less likely to act on job dissatisfaction because it was congruent with their feelings regarding their life overall”.

Stigma within dirty work occupations is seen to contribute to higher turnover because “newcomers to dirty work may have a more difficult time adopting their new social identity because its stigmatized nature is incompatible with their existing non-tainted social identities”. The authors offer that workers may be able to avoid this stigma – and the turnover effects thereof – through reframing (altering the meaning of their work), recalibrating (magnifying the positive effects), refocusing (ignoring the stigmatised functions) to maintain positive social identities, and reconceptualising the work to be meaningful and exceptional (e.g.: not everyone can do it). The authors underline the importance of person-job fit in their suggestion that “workers who already believe in the value of their work and are committed to their career may more readily invoke occupational ideologies as they encounter the negative consequences of their dirty work. In turn, the acceptance and enactment of occupational ideologies reinforces organizational identification, which has been shown to be negatively related to turnover”.

Perceptions of Alternative Employment Options

Multiple authors have commented on the relevance of perceived alternative employment options as influencing employee retention. Smith et al (2004) argue that “It is assumed, in both the economic and the psychological literatures, that the availability of (attractive or unknown) alternatives can raise comparative dissatisfaction with an existing employer”. They continue that “it could be argued that the high turnover feeds itself, as, through high mobility, workers encounter workers from other factories and can thus compare and perhaps overestimate the quality of alternatives, producing a greater propensity to quit. So, either the absence of reliable information or the presence of too much turnover-dependent network information can be said to foster higher rates of turnover.” Griffeth et al (2000) mention a modest effect on turnover from perceived alternatives. Another author (Ramlall, 2003) hints at the importance of perceived alternatives when noting that “location of the company and its compensation package were the most common factors in remaining with the company, and...compensation and lack of challenge and opportunity were the most common factors in contemplating leaving the organization”.

Job Satisfaction

The influence of job satisfaction – as discussed above – is a complex factor which shares association with many (perhaps all) of the other factors discussed in this review. One study points to a noteworthy moderating effect of remuneration to the relationship between job satisfaction and turnover, suggesting earning more money is only of influence when job satisfaction is low (Tang, et al., 2000). The idea of negative affectivity as discussed above is also of relevance here, as Lopina et al (2012) point out that “previous research has suggested that individuals high in negative affectivity are less likely to act on job dissatisfaction because it was congruent with their feelings regarding their life overall”. Given the breadth of association (direct and indirect) of job satisfaction to turnover and the many influencing factors thereof, further research of this variable on turnover outcomes within the meat industry seems warranted.

There exists a relationship between job satisfaction and successful return to work following injury in occupations with high physical workloads (Hoogendoorn WE, 2002), which is of unique relevance to the meat processing industry given the highly physical nature of the job and the high rate of injury within the meat processing industry in comparison to similar industries (National Occupational Health and Safety Commission, 1997).

6.2: Stakeholder Interviews: Summary

Interviews were conducted at three sites, and included plant managers, human resources staff, labour coordinators, floor supervisors, occupational health and safety, first aid staff and floor workers of various positions and lengths of service.

Responses were reasonably consistent between the sites interviewed. Operations and human resources managers frequently reported dirty working conditions, worker expectations and the physicality of the roles as barriers to retaining employees. There were several comments which speak to the quality of the candidates in terms of motivation and attitudes, either because potential candidates were merely attempting to fulfil a criterion to continue to receive government payments, or because meat processing fills a “stepping stone” function for many workers who are trying to get a job in a different field and then leave once alternative employment is found.

Estimated costs associated with losing and replacing employees varied between sites from \$2000 to \$10 000, largely due to the ways costs were calculated and what was included (for example, direct costs versus training-associated costs over time for more skilled roles). There does not appear to be a consensus within the industry of how costs should be viewed in this regard, though sites agree that it is measured in thousands of dollars.

Sites generally went to a lot of effort to give candidates information about the role before starting and promoted similar benefits of a meat processing job including training opportunities, early start and or finish times, and the potential for good pay grades as workers move into more skilled roles. Interestingly, it came up regularly that training opportunities were often limited by a short supply of staff which prevented sites from being able to promote staff to more skilled roles, thus creating a negative cycle whereby lack of staff leads to lack of opportunities and vice versa. At least one similar situation was reported involving larger/stronger workers who – according to one HR manager – tend to get overworked as a result of being part of a small group of people who can do the more difficult roles. This can result in these workers becoming more likely to resign and compound the problem.

Strategies reported for retaining employees were relatively limited. The most common strategies focused on providing information about the job before commencing work; communication and opportunities for feedback in the first few months of employment; and the promise of opportunities for further training. In the sites interviewed there was little by way of incentivizing longer-serving employees with reward/recognition/loyalty bonuses; identifying high performers; or promoting social opportunities on/off site.

The matter of training received highly variable responses from interview participants. Floor supervisors and floor workers were mixed in their beliefs around the adequacy of training and training resources. Despite this, training was consistently mentioned as one of the key attributes used to promote work in the meat processing industry. Floor workers were more likely to report finding their work stimulating if they were qualified for (and rotated through) a higher number of tasks, and this was found during the literature review to be a relevant factor for employee retention.

Most operational staff who were asked about exit interviews reported that these were ineffective at extracting useful information, either because workers were unwilling to attend them or because they were not forthcoming with information about their reasons for leaving. Two of the three sites interviewed continued to conduct them, while the third had given up on them.

Occupational health and safety staff were generally conservative in their beliefs of a relationship between injury and employee turnover in meat processing. They noted task rotation and work hardening as important factors to keeping people happy within their jobs but did not tend to believe that occupational health and safety issues influenced turnover to a great degree. This diverged somewhat from responses given by some floor workers, who reported that injuries were common occurrences which have made some consider their future in the industry. One worker reported that although she has sustained several injuries on the job, she did not feel that there were sufficient opportunities for her locally to consider a different career.

Floor workers interviewed were mixed in their responses of how workers were treated by management and the level of support they received from their direct supervisors. There were multiple indications that workers valued personable attitudes in their supervisors (checking in, asking about their weekend) and that the absence of this caused them to feel undervalued. The issue of supervisor communication and leadership was a recurring thread which impacted many of the themes explored throughout interviews with floor workers, and it could be said that supervisors provide a pivotal role in the experience of floor workers and consequently their likelihood of remaining in the industry. Responses regarding provision of training were mixed, with some workers reporting high degrees of satisfaction and others reporting feeling undertrained for their role. In general, workers reported that the availability of opportunities were satisfactory, even if they had to seek them out proactively. The early start and or early finish nature of working in meat processing was viewed positively in this sample, though the work was reported to be largely boring and monotonous with part of this attributed to inadequate task rotation. All employees reported having sustained multiple injuries and “niggles” throughout their employment in the industry. Most noted that this caused them to reconsider their future within the industry but had not yet left due to a sense of difficulty finding another job.

There is likely to be a survivorship bias in the information gathered from current floor workers within the meat industry, due to the likelihood that more disgruntled employees are less likely to still be in the industry and hence could not be interviewed. Therefore, responses from these employees should be viewed in the context of that possibility. Given the high degree of relevance of this data, future research should focus on clarifying these views with a more representative industry sample using anonymous surveys.

7.0 Conclusions / Recommendations

The issue of employee retention in the meat processing industry is a complex topic and is impacted by factors on a many levels. These include the nature of the industry, the work itself; geographic considerations (access to labour); organisational and managerial factors; and factors relating to individual employees. The recommendations presented here are presented with the knowledge that some plants will not be able to apply them all. For example, some plants located in regional areas will not have the luxury of being highly selective over the candidates they hire due to a shortage of local labour.

Further, it should be acknowledged that several of these recommendations may appear at first to be difficult or require significant changes in longstanding internal processes. It may help plants to view these recommendations as being options to consider in the context of their unique circumstances, and to select the low-hanging fruit or potentially higher-impact strategies in their context.

Finally, there is an important lesson worth particular attention at this stage of the project: Whilst several useful industry documents were uncovered during the initial stages of the literature review performed, it was surprising when speaking to plant stakeholders during the interview phase and at industry conferences (MINTRAC and AMPC roadshow events) that few industry managerial personnel seemed aware of the existence of these documents despite the ubiquitous problem presented by employee retention in the industry. There is a risk that these documents become lost to the passage of time relatively soon after their production, especially with gradual turnover of recruitment staff within the Australian meat processing industry. The solving of such a problem is beyond the scope of this project, however the industry would benefit from considering ways of routinely disseminating thoughts and discussion related to this topic.

The following table of recommendations are the synthesis of the literature review and stakeholder interviews, and represent a theoretical best practice model for retaining employees within the Australian meat processing industry:

Table 4: Recommendations for best practice employee retention in the Australian meat processing industry

Recommendations for Best Practice Employee Retention in the Australian Meat Processing Industry

Onboarding

- ☞ New and potential candidates should be given adequate access to job information to lessen the shock of entry. This should include documentation, pictures of work areas, videos of the tasks they are likely to perform and a plant tour.
- ☞ Induction processes should emphasise the positive contribution of the meat processing industry to the Australian economy, and the industry's reputation as a global leader in the processing of some of the highest quality meat globally.
- ☞ Candidates should be made aware of the types and frequency of training opportunities, with attention drawn to the technical proficiency required for higher level positions to foster a goal-oriented career focus and sense of pride in the acquisition of industry-specific skills.
- ☞ Candidates should be given an adequate physical assessment by qualified healthcare providers to assess their suitability for more physically demanding roles. Healthcare providers and plant management should discuss with candidates the nature of the physical work-hardening processes and provide reassurance, advice, and pathways for support.
- ☞ Candidates should be incentivised to pass 30 days length of service, given that data suggests that the odds for maintaining employment for 12 months increases substantially after this time frame. This should include the use financial incentives, vouchers or other forms of reward.
- ☞ Plants should routinely collect data from new candidates related to their perceptions of the meat industry; expectations for training and development; and belief in the value of the work they will be performing. At 30 days, candidates should be further surveyed regarding their experience of training received; overall job satisfaction; perceptions of their supervisors and relevant managers; perceptions of the physical demands of their roles; and feeling of being compatible with the work and community within the plant. These data would provide invaluable insights into the reasons for turnover of staff.

Training

- ☞ Training opportunities should be widely advertised and promoted internally.
- ☞ Formal training and development plans should be developed with all employees, with transparency provided in the event training plans are pushed back due to low resource availability. Every effort should be made to stick to these training plans.
- ☞ Significant investment should be made in supervisors with regard to communication, people management and leadership skills. This should include mental health first aid, as supervisors are among the best placed to recognise behavioural issues in their staff which may indicate a need for support. While

supervisors' primary role has traditionally been centred around production, their influence of the daily experiences and consequent retention of labour cannot be ignored.

Communication

- ☞ Plants should actively seek employee feedback through a range of non-union voice mechanisms. These should include regular voluntary surveys, staff councils and team huddles.
- ☞ Plant managers should lessen the communication gap between management and floor workers by regularly inviting small groups from the floor to morning tea and providing a forum to share ideas or express concerns they might have about relevant issues.
- ☞ Plants should report relevant production metrics on staff noticeboards and recognise/celebrate teams during periods of high production and positive performance.
- ☞ Efforts should be made to foster a team culture on site and to demonstrate how individuals contribute to the shared success of the plant.

Non-pecuniary Benefits, Reward and Recognition

- ☞ Plants should consider the introduction of loyalty bonuses and mid- and long-term service awards. These may take the form of vouchers or other gifts.
- ☞ Plants should hold events such as staff BBQs, breakfasts, and Christmas celebrations. These events foster positive work relationships and culture, and make employees feel valued.
- ☞ Plants should publicly recognise employees (through toolbox talks, company newsletters and staff noticeboards) who are high-performers and who demonstrate positive work behaviours, as well as for personal achievements outside of work.

Competing Employers

- ☞ Plants should understand the nature of competing employers in their vicinity and understand the remuneration packages and working conditions thereof to remain a competitive employer of choice. Plants should understand their advantages over these employers and actively promote them on site.

Job Factors

- ☞ All efforts should be made to maintain adequate day-to-day task rotation. Inadequate task rotation leads to multiple factors associated with employee resignation, such as increased physical discomfort, lack of stimulation, and job dissatisfaction.
- ☞ Floor workers should be trained in multiple roles as early as possible to promote a stimulating, challenging, novel work experience wherever possible.

HR Practices

- ☞ Resigning employees should be given the option of filling out an exit survey as opposed to sitting an exit interview, to capture better data on the reasons employees are leaving.

✎ Exit interviews/surveys should capture more explicit information on employees' reasons for resigning (such as dissatisfied with pay, didn't like hours, found work too challenging etc). This data should be regularly reviewed, and potential solutions explored.

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9.0 Appendices

9.1 Appendix 1: Factors associated with employee retention/turnover

| | |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Positive | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ Social Activities ☞ Monetary rewards ☞ Performance inducements ☞ Mid- and long-term service rewards ☞ Ability to be selective ☞ Non-union voice mechanisms ☞ Prior access to job information ☞ Belief in value of the work ☞ Expressed commitment to career choice ☞ High negative affectivity ☞ Work life balance ☞ Recognition/Appreciation ☞ High performers ☞ Organisational Commitment ☞ Group Identity ☞ Valuing good ideas ☞ Openness of communication channels ☞ Organisational commitment ☞ Invitational atmosphere ☞ Challenging/stimulating work – empowerment, responsibility, new possibilities ☞ Self-perceived leadership skills |
| Neutral | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ Opportunities for advancement ☞ Opportunities for alternative employment ☞ Social identity and relationship to “dirty work” ☞ Job-person fit ☞ Job attitudes and satisfaction ☞ HRM practices ☞ Internal communication system ☞ Training and development ☞ Company location ☞ Physical working conditions |
| Negative | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ High turnover culture ☞ Disgruntled employees |

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- ☞ Lack of challenge or opportunity
 - ☞ Politics of professional development
 - ☞ Readiness and initiative regarding learning (when there is lack of opportunity)
 - ☞ High pressure of work
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9.2 Appendix 2: Categorical list of factors associated with employee retention/turnover

| Category | Examples from Literature Review |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Monetary | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ Loyalty Bonuses ☞ Increased money is of influence only when job satisfaction is low |
| Social | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ Christmas Parties ☞ Social activities ☞ Positive relations with colleagues ☞ Balance between professional and personal life |
| Opportunities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ Number of job grades/categories to move up into ☞ Alternative employment opportunities ☞ Provision of training opportunities |
| Organisational | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ Ability to be selective: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High remuneration • Benefits package • Good working conditions • Job security • Potential for career development ☞ Non-union voice mechanisms ☞ Work life balance ☞ Recognition ☞ Internal communication ☞ Training and development ☞ Valuing good ideas ☞ Invitational atmosphere |
| Individual Factors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ Social identity and relationship to “dirty work” |

| | |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">☞ Job-person fit☞ Expressed commitment to career choice☞ Ability to reframe, recalibrate, refocus and reconceptualise to maintain positive identity☞ Belief in value of the work☞ Acceptance and enactment of occupational ideologies☞ Negative affectivity☞ High performer☞ Group identity☞ Loyal☞ Perceptions and experiences |
| Onboarding | <ul style="list-style-type: none">☞ Prior access to job information☞ Job-person fit |
| Human Resource Management | <ul style="list-style-type: none">☞ Compensation and rewards☞ Job Security☞ Training and development☞ Supervisor support culture☞ Work environment☞ Organisational justice☞ Openness of communication channels☞ Appreciation☞ Communication – support, encouragement, respect, opportunity by the direct supervisor |
| Job | <ul style="list-style-type: none">☞ Stimulating☞ Challenging☞ Physical working conditions☞ Empowerment |

9.3 Appendix 3: Questions used for stakeholder interviews

| Position | Questions |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Plant Manager | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ What do you see as the barriers to retaining employees? ☞ What strategies has your plant tried to retain employees? ☞ How would you rate the culture at this plant? ☞ Do you have difficulty in finding new employees? Why/why not? ☞ How would you rate the general communication systems between levels of management and workers? ☞ Do your other managers/supervisors receive leadership training? ☞ Do you have an estimate on what it costs to hire/train an employee? ☞ How would you rate the opportunities for advancement for workers currently? ☞ Is there anything else you would like to add? |
| HR/Recruitment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ What do you see as the barriers to retaining employees? ☞ What strategies has your plant tried to retain employees? ☞ Do you collect data on employee turnover? ☞ Do you know what your current retention/turnover numbers look like? ☞ Do you conduct exit interviews with any/all employees? ☞ Do you have incentives for longer-standing employees, such as mid/long term service awards? ☞ Does your plant promote any social activities on/off site? How often? ☞ How much information are employees given prior to commencing work? ☞ What are the main job factors you use to promote or sell the job to potential candidates? ☞ Do you have a method of identifying high performers? Is there a process of actively retaining these people? ☞ How do you think this plant performs at managing disgruntled employees? ☞ Is there anything else you would like to add? |
| Floor Supervisors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ What do you see as the barriers to retaining employees? ☞ Do you think task rotation is adequate? ☞ Do you think workers receive adequate training here? ☞ Do you think the employees on your floor have a good group identity? Do they behave as a team? ☞ Do the other supervisors seem to have good relationships with the workers? ☞ Have you received any training on identifying at-risk employees? ☞ Is there anything else you would like to add? |
| OH&S Staff | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ What do you think are the main OH&S issues which effect retention/turnover? |

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- ☞ Are you aware of any staff who have left due to the work being hard on their body?
 - ☞ What is your pre-employment process? Is there a physical screen?
 - ☞ Do you have a work hardening process in place? What does it look like?
 - ☞ Is there a system for monitoring and managing the psychological health of employees?
 - ☞ Do you see any employees leaving in their first 6 weeks because of injury/pain?
 - ☞ Is there anything else you would like to add?

-
- ☞ How do you feel employees are treated by management?
 - ☞ Do you feel supported by your supervisors and/or managers?
 - ☞ How would you rate the training you received?
 - ☞ Do you have opportunities to progress your skills here?
 - ☞ Have the opportunities met your expectations?
 - ☞ Do you take pride in the work you do?
 - ☞ Do you find the work stimulating?

Floor Workers

- ☞ How do you find the hours? Do they permit you to socialise or participate in hobbies/sports?
 - ☞ Have you ever sustained an injury on the job? How was it handled? Did it cause you to consider your future here?
 - ☞ Is task rotation at this plant adequate?
 - ☞ Do you feel that you were physically and mentally prepared for the work here?
 - ☞ Is there anything else you would like to add?
-