

DEVELOPING A MODEL TO SUPPORT THE EMPLOYMENT OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN THE AUSTRALIAN MEAT PROCESSING INDUSTRY

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Project Description

This project sought to develop and trial a model for employing a group of 10-15 migrants at Thomas Foods International at Murray Bridge, which can be adapted and used by other meat processing companies. The two-year project included planning, trial and review phases which enabled the model to be thoroughly tested and adjusted.

Project Content

In Stage 1, the project team worked with key TFI personnel and identified agencies, generally scoping roles and responsibilities of each and identifying further groups that needed to be included. This was followed by a face-to-face planning workshop with all identified parties, where the roles and responsibilities of the various parties were documented, and a timeline and overall plan of action developed. The Australian Migrant Resource Centre was selected as the lead support agency.

During this stage a literature review was also completed to identify and confirm the key issues needing to be considered by both refugee and migrant settlement agencies, Job Active providers and prospective red meat industry employers seeking to fill high numbers of unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled job vacancies that cannot be filled through local labour supply channels. A documented summary of the experiences of four other companies (not necessarily from the meat industry) which had undertaken similar programs was also prepared.

Stage 2 of the project essentially fell into two distinct halves. During the first half, a planning meeting between TFI, AMRC and the Murray Bridge Council was held. TFI and AMRC held a well-attended information day in Adelaide for potential applicants in January 2017.

Later that month a plant and town tour were held for prospective applicants and their families, and at the end of the day all attendees had expressed

interest in continuing. However, subsequently there was a considerable reluctance among this group to relocate, as families were reticent to re-establish themselves into a largely unknown situation, the loss of income moving from benefits to a training wage was a deterrent, and there was an overall reluctance to be the 'first' to relocate. Eventually no-one from this group progressed with the offer of employment.

At this point, TFI and the AMRC basically started again. This time they broadened the scope of prospective clients, looking beyond the arrival humanitarian clients to people who had been in Australia for over two years, had completed their AMEP (English language) requirements and had registered to look for work. By June, sixteen prospective Burmese workers had applied for employment, and of these, eleven had commenced work.

When this project concept was first developed, it was envisaged that the pilot would commence with one specific group and the learnings and processes would be developed and progressed as that specific group moved into regular employment and settled into the community.

The reality had been quite different. Firstly, we had not attracted families, as originally expected, and it was unlikely that this would occur until Murray Bridge became a dedicated re-settlement center. Secondly, recruitment had been ongoing, around smaller groups and the attrition rates had been quite high.

So, the staged approach to this project originally anticipated had not eventuated, as at the same time as we were reviewing induction processes and support mechanisms, we were also still receiving new recruits.

The advantage of this was that an ongoing working relationship had already been developed between TFI and AMRC and this was about to be formalised into a Memorandum of Understanding. This relationship was already well established and would endure beyond the life of this project.

The disadvantage was that the tidy, 'lock, step' approach originally anticipated had not occurred and that at every meeting we were basically reviewing and improving the entire process, not a particular stage. Therefore, at no point could we say that the processes for any stage were really 'finished', and we were unlikely to bring it all together until the project ended and we could update the draft manual into a document for wider release.

Stage 3 of the project ran from July to November 2017.

During this period, there had been further employment of migrant and refugee workers, with ten people currently still employed. The Murraylands Migrant Resource Centre continued to play an important role in providing support to arrange accommodation, arranging transport such as carpooling, and liaising with the TFI staff as employment commenced.

MINTRAC visited TFI for the two days of filming on 2-3 August and filmed four of the refugee workers as well as key TFI and AMRC personnel involved in the project. This film is now available to the wider industry.

Murraylands MRC representative continued to provide support for relocation/removals housing, liaising with landlords, bond raising assistance, education, medical. Transport to and from work remained a big challenge as many of the workers were commuting from as far afield as Adelaide, and the MRC had been assisting with arranging carpooling.

Stage 4, planned to run from December 2017-February 2018, was essentially for review, evaluation and adoption.

However, on 3 January 2018 Thomas Foods International's meat works in Murray Bridge was severely damaged by fire. All employees were safely evacuated, but the factory's largest building was destroyed at a cost likely run into the millions of dollars.

In the weeks following the fire TFI worked to create new positions at its other plants to take up the production slack left by the fire. Many employees were deployed to either Lobethal or Tamworth. Understandably, the company Human Resources team was overwhelmed with the need to address pressing personnel issues, and a decision was made to finalise the project. Ten of the migrant workers were still employed although half were still on stand-down following the fire.

Project Outcome

Although the project came to an abrupt conclusion at Murray Bridge, a great deal was learned. The four most critical learnings were:

- / the importance of planning and preparation, and of dedicated, experienced and well supported personnel responsible for the project within the processing company, with strong continuing management support
- / a strong, continuing relationship is essential between the settlement provider, the processing company, and the local community
- / the importance of taking time to get to know each of the migrant workers as individuals, their stories, their settlement experiences and their work experiences
- / the need for proximity to a designated refugee settlement center, to avoid further disruption to families thinking of taking up employment in the meat processing industry.

There is no doubt that many of the workers taken on at Murray Bridge have the potential to become long-term, valuable employees, and that the overall potential of migrants and refugees to fill workforce shortages is important for the industry.

But the benefits expected from the relocation of families into the local community were not achieved, and therefore not tested. In addition, with the benefit of hindsight, there was probably a lot more that could have been done to provide structured support to company personnel in terms of staff preparation, monitoring and support, and an opportunity to implement and test these learnings is needed.

We do not believe that the 'model' developed within this project is ready, yet, for widespread roll-out across the industry. It is our recommendation that the industry invests in two further pilots, to enable the model to be further developed and refined.

Benefit for Industry

This project has resulted in an excellent short film which provides an overview of the project, features some of the migrant employees and explains the partnership between AMRC and TFI. In addition, a Resource Manual has been developed for use by other processing companies. These two resources will be useful tools for other processors contemplating recruiting migrants and refugees.