Enhancing Attraction and Retention in the Northern Cattle Industry

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Queensland

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Executive Summary

The Northern Cattle Industry in Australia, which spans Queensland, the Northern Territory, and northern Western Australia, is a foundational pillar of the nation's agricultural economy. This region is responsible for a significant proportion of Australia's beef production, utilising vast tracts of land and supporting rural communities through employment, economic activity, and food security. The industry's contribution extends beyond direct economic value; it underpins the social fabric of remote and regional Australia, sustaining local businesses, schools, and essential services. Despite its importance, the Northern Cattle Industry faces a critical and persistent challenge: attracting and retaining a skilled and motivated workforce.

This workforce issue is not unique to northern Australia but reflects a broader, global trend in agriculture. The median age of agricultural workers continues to rise, and the sector struggles to appeal to younger generations. Factors such as perceptions of low pay, the demanding and remote nature of the work, and the perceived view of limited opportunities for career progression deter many potential entrants. These challenges are compounded by negative stereotypes about agricultural work, which often overshadow the reality of modern, technologically advanced, and rewarding careers available in the industry.

This report highlights that the sustainability and future growth of the Northern Cattle Industry depend on its ability to address these workforce challenges. Without a steady influx of skilled workers, the industry risks stagnation, reduced productivity, and diminished capacity to innovate and compete globally. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach—one that not only improves remuneration and working conditions but also reshapes public perceptions, enhances communication about the true value of agricultural careers, and fosters collaboration between industry, government, and educational institutions. By learning from both domestic initiatives and international best practices, the Northern Cattle Industry can position itself as an attractive, resilient, and sustainable sector for current and future generations.

"Without a steady influx of skilled workers, the industry risks stagnation, reduced productivity, and diminished capacity to innovate and compete globally."

Keywords: Northern Australia, cattle, retention, workforce attraction

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Foreword

The topic of my Nuffield research study “Enhancing attraction and retention in the Northern Cattle Industry” comes about at a time when global food security is at real risk due to the difficulty in attracting a new generation of ‘farmers’ to the table. With the estimated current Australian median age of agriculture industry workers sitting at 50 years of age (ABARES, 2023), I believed it was time to look at and explore options that will help to enhance attraction and retention of people into the Northern Cattle Industry. For the purpose of this report, the Northern Cattle Industry covers Queensland, the Northern Territory and the northern half of Western Australia, which is the top half of Australia in Figure 1 below.

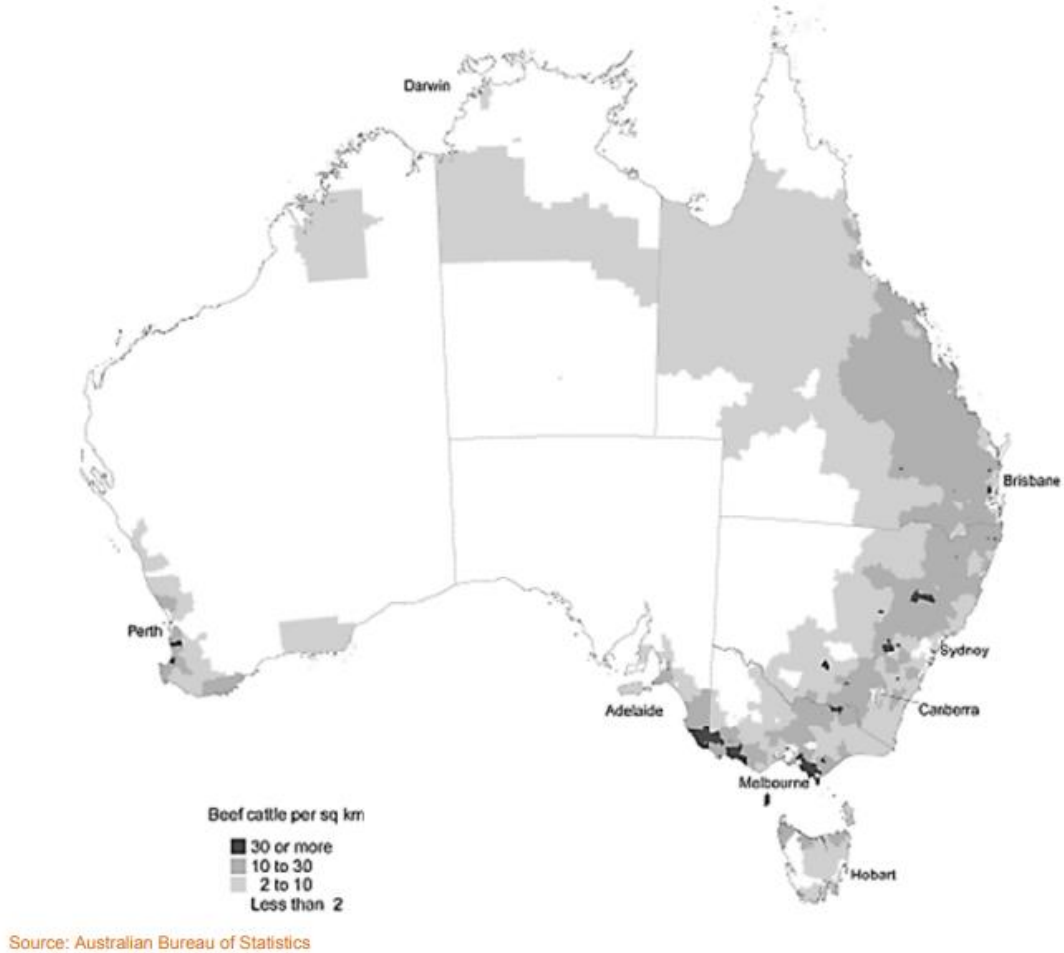


Figure 1. Distribution of cattle across Australia (Source: ABARES)

Having spent the last 22 years associated with and working in the Northern Cattle Industry, I have gone from an entry-level station hand to helicopter pilot, station manager, to my current role as a General Manager of cattle for a large corporation. Over this time, there have been many advances in technologies and changing methods across the industry. Unfortunately, there has also been a growing shortage of people willing to work and make a career out of agriculture. It was early in my Nuffield journey that I realised that this problem was not only restricted to Australia but was a global issue for agriculture. It was while travelling through France, when I asked wine producer Fabien Demois about risks to his business and he replied "biggest risk to business is to find workers", that I realised how significant the problem of finding people is. It is changing businesses and the way businesses conduct business, and with that changing the landscape of agriculture. There are businesses around the world that have shifted their core business from one commodity to another. Jamie and Will Butler from Meon Springs in the United Kingdom shifted from being a dairy and pig farm to a less staff-intensive dryland and tourism operation and severely reduced their dairy operation to better accommodate staff. This has an ongoing effect on local communities, so the issue becomes larger again.

Due to agriculture being such a diverse industry, it was hard to capture all the different aspects and learnings, so I have had to cut it down to what I am experienced and familiar with, and that is the Northern Cattle Industry in Australia. I will look to explore ways that have been used here in Australia as well as other parts of the world to attract and retain people into agriculture and help to build ideas around what may be used to improve the current situation.



Figure 2. The author at Redlands Angus Stud, near Hysham, Montana, USA (source: Author, 2023)

My Nuffield travels took me to Singapore, France, UK, Canada, USA, as well as 14 days spent travelling through Australia. During my time travelling through Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria I was able to conduct interviews with some of Australia's top agricultural companies and discuss current methods, ideas, and ways of attracting and retaining staff. Knowing that most organisations may not have the capital or cash flow to do what the 'big businesses' are doing, this report may bring ideas to the table which could be adopted and modified to suit businesses of varying sizes.

Table 1. Travel itinerary

Travel date	Location	Visits/contacts
June 7-8, 2022	Singapore	David Leong, ANZ Singapore Andrew Cox, MLA Singapore
June 9-14, 2022	France	Fabien Demois, La Grange Billard, Vineyard and Winery
June 15-22, 2022	United Kingdom	Ian Holma, Cranfield Water Institute Tim Harper, Commercial Director at Blankney Estate Jamie Butler, Meon Springs
June 23-1 July, 2022	Canada	Spencer Hilton, Hilton Ventures Brewery Ed & Lyle Miller, Highway 21 Feeders – Feedlot Ray Price, Sunterra Supermarkets and Nursery Harold Perry, Perry Farms Jim Staunton, Antelope Butte Ranch
July 1-21, 2022	USA	Bill Couser, Couser Cattle Feedlot Tom Hauschel, Heartland Co-op Lance Lillibridge, President Iowa Corn Growers Assoc. Amy Wright, Fort Union Ranch, NM Sam Snyder, Texas Farm Bureau Michael White, Vernon TX

February 16-28, 2023	Australia	Richard Quigley, Quigley Farms, Trangie, NSW Luke Cantrill, Cantrill Organics, Orange, NSW Mitch Henderson, Berriwillock, Victoria Mick Bryant, Hewitt, Narrandera, NSW Dusty Pascoe, Raywood, Victoria
May 14-7 June, 2023	USA	Bob Redland, Redland Angus, Hysham MT Beau Blake, PV Ranch Jenny Moke, Redland Angus

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Nuffield Australia for their dedication and support during the last few years through some of the most challenging times of COVID-19. Nuffield Australia never gave up trying to make this a valuable experience and keeping all scholars engaged while holding the course and integrity of the program.

I would also like to acknowledge Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA) for their continued support of the Nuffield Australia program and for providing support for my scholarship.

A huge thank you must be extended to my employers, Hewitt Cattle Australia, for allowing me to undergo such a life-changing professional and personal development opportunity. I would also like to thank the many hospitable farmers from around the world who in some way helped or gave their time to me, with a very special mention to the Redland Angus family of Montana, USA. Their generosity and hospitality will never be forgotten, and what I learnt there on a personal note will also never be forgotten.

Also, a very big thank you to my family, Candice, Summer, Bridie, and Lawson. I would never have had the courage to do this if it wasn't for your continuing support. All I can hope for is that one day it inspires you to get out there and have a go at whatever it is you wish to achieve.

Abbreviations

AACo	Australian Agricultural Company
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
CPC	Consolidated Pastoral Company
DAFF	Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
FFA	Future Farmers of America
MLA	Meat and Livestock Australia
MT	Montana
USA	United States of America

Objectives

The objective of this report is to investigate current methods of attracting and retaining people into the Northern Cattle Industry and to look at ways to explore methods and opportunities to improve, specifically discussing:

- Current perception of industry remuneration and benefits.
- Australia is not alone in this problem; it is a global issue.
- Collaboration and industry promotion.
- What is working domestically to attract and retain people into the Northern Cattle Industry, and what is working internationally to improve this.

Introduction

The Northern Cattle Industry plays a vital role in the Australian agricultural sector, accounting for 75% of farming land dedicated to beef (PwC, 2011), and in 2022 provided $740 million of farm gate value (MLA, 2022). This sees the industry contributing significantly to the regional economies across Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia. While it is a large contributor to the economy, it is also widely known that attracting and retaining skilled individuals in the industry has become a growing challenge in recent years. Unfortunately, detailed data on the exact number of individuals hired annually in the Northern Cattle Industry and the number of people who leave each year is not readily available. The industry's decentralised nature, mixed with a lack of comprehensive reporting systems, makes it challenging to gather accurate statistics. However, it is recognised that the Northern Cattle Industry faces significant challenges in attracting and retaining skilled individuals. These challenges are primarily due to factors such as remote work locations, physical demands, the perception of limited career advancement and lower wages, which all contribute to a higher turnover rate within the industry.

In order to address these issues and ensure a sustainable and thriving Northern Cattle Industry, proactive measures need to be taken. Industry needs to understand the reasons why individuals depart the industry and implement strategies to overcome this. This report will specifically focus on discussing the current perception of industry compensation and benefits provided to employees, the importance of collaboration and industry promotion, examine both domestic and international initiatives that have been successful in retaining people in the industry and improving its overall appeal as a long-term career, and identify potential strategies that could be implemented to attract and retain a skilled workforce in the Northern Cattle Industry.

Chapter 1: Collaboration and Industry Promotion

Australia is not alone; it is a global issue

As stated in the introduction, the global agricultural sector is currently grappling with a significant labour shortage. During my travels, when farmers were asked "what is your number one risk to your business?", the answer that came back was "biggest risk to business is labour" (Miller, L., pers. comm., 2022). This scarcity of workers is creating numerous challenges throughout agriculture around the world. In many countries, the younger generation is showing less interest in pursuing agricultural careers, leading to a lack of skilled workers. Additionally, population shifts towards urban areas further exacerbate the problem, as rural communities struggle to attract and maintain workforce numbers.

Agriculture has long been an essential industry, providing the backbone for global food production and playing a vital role in economic development. However, negative social views can hinder employee recruitment in agriculture, perpetuating stereotypes and misconceptions that discourage people from pursuing careers in this sector. To overcome these biases, it is crucial to address them head-on and promote a more positive and accurate understanding of agriculture and particularly the Northern Cattle Industry.

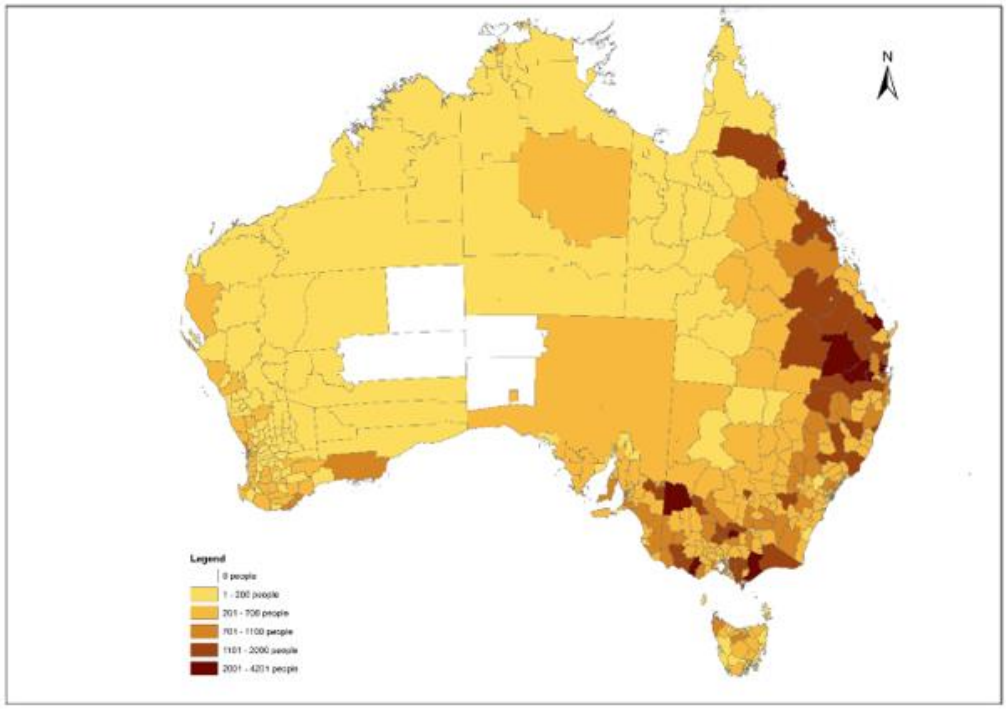
One of the key strategies for changing negative social views is to educate and inform the public about the industry. Many people have an outdated perception of agriculture, associating it with manual labour, low wages, and limited opportunities for career growth. By showcasing the modern and diverse nature of contemporary agriculture, people can begin to understand the exciting and rewarding possibilities within the sector. We only have to look at our counterparts in the USA where their culture seems to be “pro-farming and agriculture”. The USA has successfully maintained a positive perception of agriculture largely due to the ‘cowboy culture’ image helped along by numerous school level programs. Such programs as the 4-H (head, heart, hands and health) and the FFA (Future Farmers of America) are leading the way in giving school children, parents and school teachers a positive interaction with agriculture. Along with educating school children and teachers, there also must be a focus on educating parents about not only the importance of agriculture but also the employment opportunities within it. This concept of educating parents about careers in agriculture has been seen as an important step in attracting newcomers to the Northern Cattle Industry in Australia. Some companies have realised the “need to educate parents” (Burge, K., Human Resource Business Partner, AACo, pers. comm.) and take the opportunity at Career Days to do just this. Understanding the need for parents to feel comfortable in their child’s choice of work helps relieve family pressures towards children who look to the Northern Cattle Industry as a career and not just a ‘gap’ year work placement.

When it comes to the Northern Cattle Industry the closest resemblance of it outside of Australia would be the USA's ranching industry, where days are spent in the saddle or dusty yards working both horses and cattle in a manner not too far removed from what you would find on a Northern Cattle operation during the midst of the mustering season. However, a very notable difference emerged when the average work tenure for a ranch hand in the USA was compared to that of a station hand in Australia. In the

USA common length of employment for a ranch hand to stay on one ranch was between 6 and 18 years (Redland, B. and Blake, B., pers. comm., 2023) while the similar station hand in Australia was under 3 years (Burge, K., Cannon, J. and Cook, L., pers. comm.). When asked about this Bob Redland from Redland Red Angus, Hysham MT stated that if his current ranch hand was to leave, he would “have a hundred cowboys waiting to start. Everyone wants to be a cowboy”. This sentiment was shared by Beau Blake of PV Ranch, MT. Beau’s opinion was that the USA had a “mystified” view of the cowboy, a “weird outlook” on horses and a willingness to “embrace history”. This ability to promote a societal appreciation of what is done on ranches has helped both attraction and retention of people in the ranching industry, although wages are comparatively lower than those in Australia.

Although the USA may have their “mystified” cowboy, and their silver screen heroes, Australia must look at different avenues to achieve this change in perception. This can be achieved through public relations campaigns, educational initiatives, and collaboration between agricultural organisations and educational institutions. Another important aspect of overcoming negative social views is to promote the economic and social importance of agriculture. Many individuals may not realise the significant contributions that agriculture makes to their lives and communities. By highlighting how agriculture is at the heart of food security, job creation, and rural development, a positive narrative can be created that resonates with potential recruits. Collaboration between agricultural organisations, governments, and educational institutions is essential to develop effective recruitment strategies. Working together, these sectors can identify and address the barriers that limit recruitment in agriculture and develop initiatives that target potential recruits. This collaborative effort can include career fairs, internships, apprenticeships, and educational programs that provide hands-on experience and expose individuals to the diverse career paths within the agricultural industry. Any increase in agricultural exposure and interactions as a whole will reflect directly on the Northern Cattle Industry and increase awareness of opportunities.

Figure 3 shows the wide distribution of people required for agriculture across Australia in often remote areas. Although density is not high, the requirement is still essential to the continuation of the northern beef industry in these areas.



Source: Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Science

Figure 3. Distribution of people working in agriculture (Source: ABARES, 2023)

Communication of remuneration and benefits

With only 23% of agricultural employees earning more than $1,249 a week compared to 38% of the Australian workforce (DAFF, 2021) it would be easy to say that people working in agriculture are paid less than their counterparts. However, what does this statistic not tell us? It does not tell us what other benefits are supplied to employees as part of their “package”, especially in the case of the Northern Cattle Industry. The Northern Cattle Industry often provides various benefits to its employees, such as food and accommodation. Considering the remote locations where many cattle stations are situated, the provision of these benefits becomes crucial for sustaining a capable workforce. Food is often supplied as part of an employee's compensation package, ensuring that they have access to nutritious meals while working in isolated areas. Accommodation is also provided, typically in the form of on-site housing or living quarters. This not only alleviates the burden of finding suitable housing in remote regions but also contributes to a sense of community among employees living and working together. These benefits contribute to the well-being and overall satisfaction of employees, making the Northern Cattle Industry an attractive employment option, especially for those seeking a unique lifestyle experience combined with steady employment opportunities. However, are these extra benefits being translated into real terms and communicated to potential recruits? If we break these benefits down into real values, we can see that it could make a significant difference and could potentially change the views of potential employees and make the industry a more attractive path.

The average grocery bill per week for one person in Australia is $152 (Canstar Blue, 2025) with the average weekly rental cost sitting at $570 (CoreLogic Australia, 2023).

Assuming that this is a shared 3-bedroom house, it would equate to $190 per person per week, which would be considered the equivalent of shared accommodation commonly seen in the Northern Cattle Industry. So, in addition to their weekly wages a typical person working in the Northern Cattle Industry, where food and accommodation are supplied, would be better off by $342 or $17,784 a year. Taking this into consideration, is money the issue? For most it is the lack of understanding and awareness of the real value of food and accommodation commonly supplied to employees throughout the Northern Cattle Industry. If it is only looked at by the annual salary figures that do not capture this value then, yes, money may be a contributing factor for people not looking at the industry as a viable long-term career. If a potential employee or school leaver was to do a quick search of the Pastoral Award rates (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2020) to see what their earning potential would be if they were to get into agriculture, they would see that a starting level would be $859.30/week ($44,683/year) and a “Level 8” would earn $1,069.10/week ($55,593.20/year). This compared to other industries may seem low, however if they had the knowledge that some of the positions that they would go into would supply food and accommodation which would equate to at least another $17,784 annually then they may reconsider their options.

This value does not take into consideration the time to source the groceries, the time to cook (as this is in most positions also included) along with an estimated annual cost of power at $1,000 and internet/wifi annually of $450 per person.

Communicating this to potential employees should be seen as critical to attracting people into the industry. This also needs to be communicated to a wider audience, including parents, schools, universities at any opportunity possible. On top of competitive wages being supplied some are looking to increase the employees’ annual leave component (Cook, L., NAPCo, pers. comm.) from the legislated 4 weeks to 7 weeks annually. Due to the remoteness of station locations and the seasonal requirements on these stations, the extra leave allows staff to travel the often long distances to family and social activities while not having the worry of additional time off work without pay.

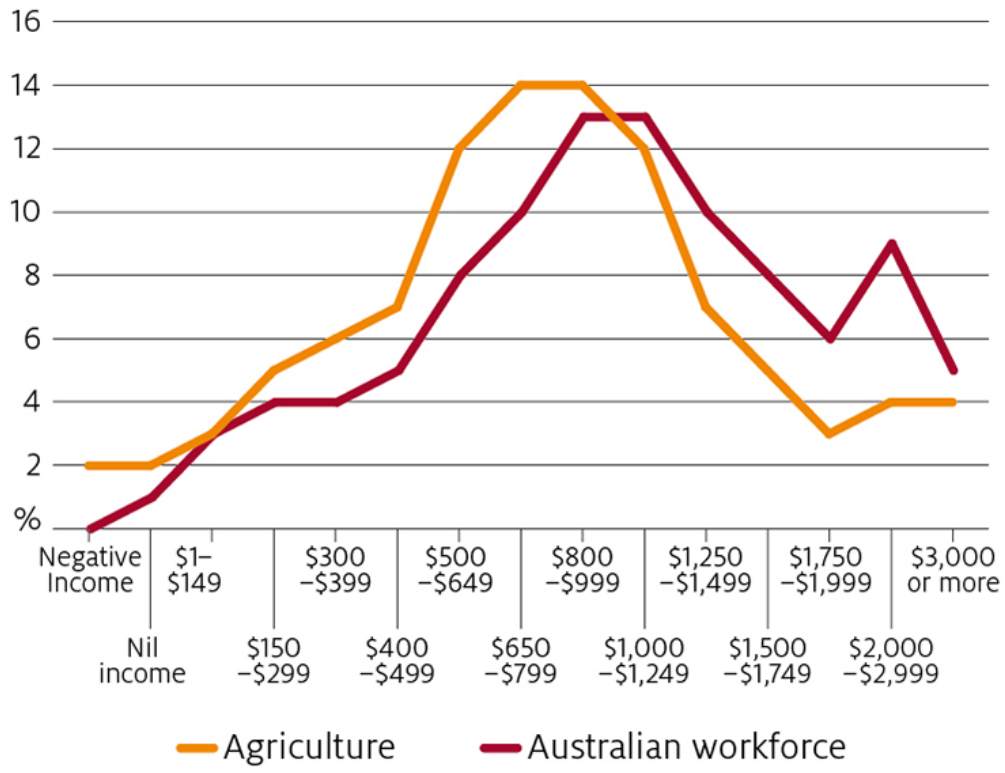


Figure 4. Wage comparison in Australia (Source: DAFF, 2022)

Outside of the award wages, there is very little awareness of the remunerations of positions not covered by the award such as managers, regional or area managers, general managers etc. Many Northern Cattle Industry stations are paying cattle station managers salaries of between $100,000 and $180,000, with often the supply of a work vehicle, food, accommodation, boarding school contributions, supply of “in home” tutors and electricity for not only them but also their family. If you add the value of a rented 3-bedroom house ($29,640/year), average grocery bill for a family of four of $9,724/year and add onto the salary of $140,000 a year would equate to a total package of $179,364/year in a management role in the Northern Cattle Industry. This would equate to $3,449 a week which would put a Northern Cattle manager earning almost twice the amount of the Australian average adult weekly earnings. Because this information is usually kept confidential and not discussed, very few people outside the industry realise the true earning potential of a career within the Northern Cattle Industry. Better information about real-life wages coupled with better awareness of the value of benefits associated with the Northern Cattle Industry would help to attract a wider range of people in the industry.

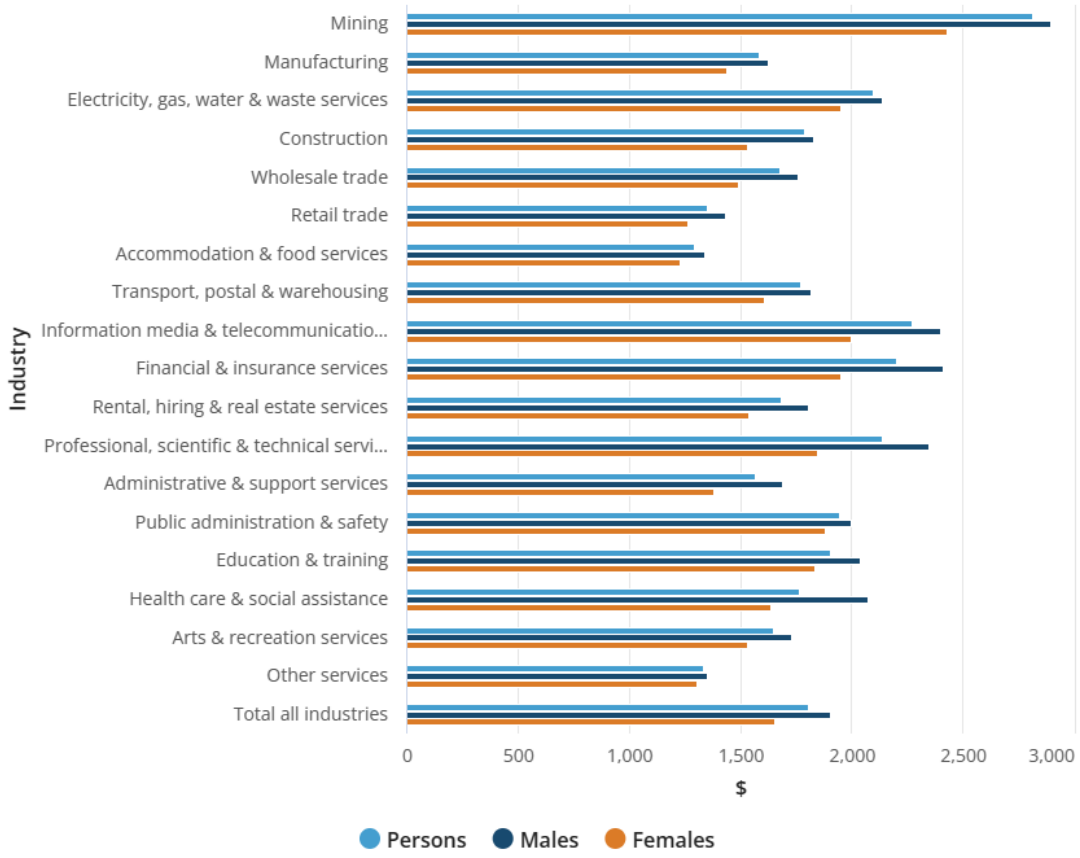


Figure 5. Average weekly ordinary time earnings (Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023)

Chapter 2: What is working – domestically and overseas

Retention of staff can only be achieved once staff have been employed. So, what is working to attract staff in the first place? Cath Graham from CPC credits CPC's success in this space to a strong social media presence. In this space it gives an opportunity for CPC to express the story of the company, along with the lifestyle and opportunities prospective employees could look forward to being rewarded with. CPC then builds on this social media image on the ground by setting a good culture, giving training opportunities, opportunities to transfer to different company stations, and a pathway for a career. This is backed by the fact that 40% (Graham, C., CPC, pers. comm.) of referrals for open positions come from “word of mouth” from current or past employees along with people associated with the company.

With the changing way communities interact with each other, having a social media presence is all but essential for most companies, especially larger organisations that require a larger number of employees. Having this social media presence allows viewers not only to see the areas in which these companies operate, but also, get a glimpse into the culture of the company. This allows potential employees to judge which businesses may align with their own personal views and requirements, giving a better chance of success for longevity of employment.

If the business is a long-standing generational family farm business, retaining current employees or family members to the business may need to take a more drastic approach. Generational farming has added complexities. Unlike new employees coming into agriculture who have the choice of where they want to work, what industry or type of agriculture they want to pursue and how much money they are willing to work for, those in generational farms are not normally offered these choices. During a visit to a dairy in France, this was discussed with 6th generation farmer Antoine Maurice. Antoine's family farm had been run as a conventional dairy with approximately 120 Friesian/Jersey cows prior to Antoine’s involvement. With Antoine’s interests stretching further afield than running a conventional dairy farm, along with increasing financial pressures due to rising costs, the family had to look to pivot the business into something that would not only financially sustain the business but also keep the younger generation interested in being involved with the farm long-term. This led the family to transition from conventional dairy to one that is multi-ventured. With Antoine taking charge, the family went down the pathway of manufacturing yoghurt, cheese and rice pudding. This expansion not only safeguarded the future of the family farm through diversification of risk, it also incorporated a larger variety of skill sets and interests for family members, current and future staff members. Whether they were interested in dairy farming, manufacturing, sales and development, brand development, product sales, or customer service, there was a greater ability to have something of interest to them. This would increase the chance of greater retention of family members and staff to stay in the farming business as it better serviced a greater cross section of interests while still being involved in the agricultural business.

If the main risk to business is people retention, should a business look to diversify (if possible) to keep key personnel? Is it time a business looks at its operations and changes to suit the people instead of needing to find people to suit the business? This is something that generational businesses, which are common in agriculture, may

need to consider in the future if they are wanting to adapt to the changing social conditions.

Retention was also a topic while in discussions with ranch managers in the USA and Canada. When asked about current retention practices, a common theme was the ability to provide some land or paddock to the staff member to run either additional horses or give the ability to agist some cattle on the Ranch. Jim Staunton of Antelope Butte Ranch in Canada runs a family operation that has been family owned since 1899. Jim had provided his main hired hand the ability to freely agist 30 head of cows. This is under the proviso that the hired hand sells the calves back to the Ranch. As well as giving additional income to the staff member, it also gives them a level of inclusion into the operation.

In the USA, Beau Blake (Ranch manager at PV Ranch and Feedlot, Hysham MT) provides his cowboys with the ability to run an additional seven horses. These horses provided additional work horses to the ranch but also gave the cowboy an opportunity to “trade” (sell) horses as an additional income to the cowboy wage. These additional horses provided them with the feeling they are doing something for themselves by riding these horses and educating them while they are at work. They were still completing the ranch tasks while riding and educating the horses but with the sense it was for themselves and that they would benefit financially from the input. Both situations were provided to staff members with little financial output to the overall operation of the ranch however gave immense meaning to the recipients. The success of these is seen at both ranches with long tenure in staff. At the PV Ranch the sourcing of hired hands is at a level where there is a waitlist of people wanting to join the ranch to work. It is also worth noting that at the PV Ranch staff were also supplied housing, electricity, beef, health benefits and a retirement plan which all lead to an attractive work environment.



Figure 6. Learning about staff retention with Jim Staunton (third from left), Antelope Butte Ranch, Lundbreck, Canada (Source: Author, 2022)

Chapter 3: Innovating for Retention and Career Development

Retention in the Northern Cattle Industry cannot be achieved through recruitment alone. While attracting new entrants remains important, the long-term strength of the industry depends on its ability to keep skilled, motivated and experienced people within businesses. This requires a shift from viewing employees as short-term labour to recognising them as individuals with career ambitions, personal interests and a desire for progression. Innovation in retention must therefore focus on career development, training, flexible incentives and workplace cultures that encourage people to build a future in the industry.

One of the strongest ways to improve retention is to provide clear career pathways. Many employees enter the industry as station hands or junior workers, but they may not always understand how that role can lead to positions in livestock management, machinery operation, administration, logistics, training, business management or ownership. Without a visible pathway, staff may see the job as seasonal or temporary rather than as the beginning of a long-term career. Businesses can address this by mapping out progression opportunities, setting achievable milestones and discussing career goals with employees on a regular basis. A worker who understands how their current role connects to future responsibility is more likely to remain engaged and committed.

Training and skill development are central to this approach. The modern cattle industry increasingly relies on technology, data collection, animal welfare knowledge, grazing management, workplace safety, financial literacy and leadership skills. Offering access to formal training, mentoring, workshops and practical on-property learning can build employee confidence and capability. Training should not be viewed only as a cost to the business, but as an investment in productivity and loyalty. When staff feel that a business is willing to invest in their development, they are more likely to invest their own effort and time back into that business.

Generational family farms face a particular retention challenge because family members and long-term staff may have interests that extend beyond traditional cattle production. In these situations, business diversification can be an effective retention strategy. Diversification might include tourism, direct-to-consumer beef sales, backgrounding, breeding enterprises, environmental projects, agistment, education programs, farm-stay accommodation or value-added products. By expanding the range of activities within the business, farms can create roles that suit different skills and aspirations. This is especially important for younger generations who may want to remain connected to agriculture but also wish to pursue interests in marketing, technology, hospitality, business development or sustainability.

Incentives also play a significant role in retaining staff. While wages remain important, many employees value benefits that improve lifestyle, autonomy and connection to the business. Additional leave can be particularly valuable in remote areas where travel to family, friends and services requires time and expense. Opportunities for personal enterprise, such as running a small number of cattle or horses, can also increase loyalty by giving employees a sense of ownership and personal reward. These incentives do not always require major financial investment, but they can create a stronger emotional and practical connection between the employee and the workplace.

Workplace culture is equally important. A supportive workplace is one where staff feel respected, included and able to communicate openly. This includes fair rostering, safe working conditions, recognition of effort, constructive feedback and leadership that takes an interest in employee wellbeing. In remote agricultural settings, the workplace is often also the social environment, making culture even more influential. Poor culture can quickly drive people away, while a positive culture can become one of the strongest reasons people stay. Businesses that promote teamwork, respect and shared purpose are more likely to retain staff through difficult seasons and industry pressures.

Overall, innovation for retention and career development requires businesses to adapt to the needs and aspirations of current and future workers. The Northern Cattle Industry must offer more than employment; it must offer a future. By creating clear progression pathways, investing in training, diversifying business opportunities, offering meaningful incentives and building supportive workplace cultures, cattle businesses can increase staff loyalty and longevity. These strategies are not only beneficial for employees, but also essential for the productivity, stability and long-term sustainability of the industry.

Case Study: Redland Red Angus, Hysham MT, USA

Bob Redland, of Redland Red Angus Ranch in Montana, USA, is a fourth-generation cattleman who understands the importance of retaining skilled, reliable and trusted employees. Rather than relying on wages alone, Bob has recognised that long-term loyalty can be strengthened by offering benefits that support both the employee's working life and personal ambitions. A strong example of this approach is Chad Finke, who has worked with the Redland family operation for nearly 20 years. In his role as a ranch hand, Chad is provided with family accommodation as well as access to substantial space, yards and cattle-handling facilities that allow him to operate his own family-owned American Quarter Horse stud alongside his employment. This arrangement gives Chad the opportunity to earn additional income through the sale of his horses, while also building a deeper practical and personal connection to the ranch. By supporting Chad's own enterprise, Redland Red Angus has created a mutually beneficial relationship: the business retains an experienced and committed employee, while Chad gains security, opportunity and a strong reason to remain loyal to the position and the facilities that make his family business possible.



Figure 7. Gathering cows and calves with Chad Finke (centre) and the Redland crew, Hysham MT, USA (Source: Author, 2023)

Chapter 4: Cross industry collaboration

Effective attraction and retention in the Northern Cattle Industry cannot be achieved by individual businesses working in isolation. The workforce challenges facing northern Australia are complex and are influenced by education, public perception, training access, regional infrastructure, government policy and industry promotion. For this reason, collaboration between agricultural organisations, government bodies and educational institutions must be strengthened. A coordinated approach would allow the industry to better communicate its needs, prepare future workers with relevant skills and create stronger pathways into long-term agricultural careers.

A key benefit of collaboration is the ability to align training programs with the real needs of cattle businesses. Schools, vocational education providers and universities may offer agricultural subjects or courses, but these programs are most effective when they reflect the skills required on modern cattle operations. Today's industry requires more than practical stock handling. Employees increasingly need capability in animal welfare, workplace safety, machinery operation, grazing management, technology, data recording, communication and leadership. By working directly with industry, education providers can design training that is practical, current and relevant to northern conditions. This ensures students are better prepared for employment and employers have greater confidence in the skills of new entrants.

Government also has an important role in supporting these partnerships. In remote and regional areas, distance and cost can limit access to training, work placements and career exposure. Government support through funding, transport assistance, regional training incentives and apprenticeship programs can help reduce these barriers. Policy settings that encourage collaboration can also ensure that workforce development is treated as a shared responsibility rather than a problem left solely to employers. When government recognises the strategic value of the Northern Cattle Industry, investment in people becomes an investment in regional economies, food production and rural community sustainability.

Career fairs, internships, apprenticeships and hands-on learning experiences are practical ways to expose young people and career changers to the variety of roles within the industry. Many potential recruits have limited understanding of what a career in cattle production can involve. They may picture only physical labour in remote locations, without seeing opportunities in livestock management, agribusiness, logistics, technology, environmental management, training, administration and leadership. Structured exposure allows individuals to experience the industry before making career decisions. It also gives businesses the opportunity to identify motivated people early and build relationships with future employees.

Collaboration should also include parents, teachers and community leaders, as these groups often influence career decisions. If they understand the modern realities of the Northern Cattle Industry, including career progression, training opportunities, remuneration packages and lifestyle benefits, they are more likely to support agriculture as a legitimate and rewarding career choice. Building this broader awareness can help shift outdated perceptions and strengthen the industry's reputation.

Overall, fostering collaboration across industry, government and education is essential to building a sustainable workforce for the Northern Cattle Industry. By aligning training

with industry needs, supporting practical pathways and improving exposure to agricultural careers, the sector can attract people who are better prepared, better informed and more likely to remain in the industry over the long term. This collaborative model recognises that workforce development is not only an industry issue, but a regional and national priority.

Case Study: National FFA Organization, USA

The National FFA Organization was established in 1928 with the mission “to prepare future generations for the challenges of feeding a growing population” (FFA, 2026). It teaches that “agriculture is more than planting and harvesting – it’s a science, it’s a business and it’s an art” (FFA, 2026). With more than one million members across the USA, the FFA has become a major pathway for exposing young people to agriculture through education, leadership and practical career development.

The strength of the FFA model is that it presents agriculture as a broad and modern industry, not just a traditional farming pathway. Students are introduced to careers in animal production, cropping, agribusiness, science, technology, environmental management, mechanics, communications, food production and entrepreneurship. This helps young people with different interests see a future for themselves in agriculture, whether that is on farm, in business, in science or in leadership.

The FFA delivers this through classroom instruction, supervised agricultural experiences and student leadership activities. Students learn technical agricultural knowledge, apply it through projects, work experience or enterprise, and build confidence through public speaking, competitions, community service and local chapter leadership. For the Northern Cattle Industry in Australia, the key lesson is that early, positive and repeated exposure to agriculture can help normalise the industry as a respected career choice and strengthen school-to-industry pathways.

Conclusions

The Northern Cattle Industry in Australia faces significant challenges in attracting and retaining workers over many years, but these challenges are not insurmountable, nor is Northern Australia alone in this challenge. This has been identified as an ongoing challenge across the globe. This report has identified areas that, with better understanding by the industry and the greater community, can lead to alleviating the problem. By addressing issues such as communication of remuneration, promoting better working conditions, increasing collaboration within the industry, and learning from successful international models, Australia can create a more sustainable and resilient workforce for the future. With the right combination of local innovation and global cooperation, the Northern Cattle Industry can overcome its workforce challenges and secure its position as a vital part of Australia's agricultural economy.

As is the case in most scenarios, the issue of attracting and retaining people in the Northern Cattle Industry did not arrive overnight. Many contributing factors have played a role in arriving at where the industry is now. In the past, it was not uncommon for people to stay within the industry, and in some cases, on the same property or station for decades.

The Northern Cattle Industry in Australia has faced significant challenges in attracting and retaining people over the last 40 years, and a variety of interconnected factors have contributed to this ongoing struggle. These challenges stem from economic pressures, social and demographic changes, environmental factors, and the evolving nature of the industry itself. For the industry to keep moving forward and thrive, it will need to look at the way it overcomes these issues and communicate this to the younger generation to give them confidence in the long-term viability of the Northern Cattle Industry.

Recommendations

- **Communicate the Full Value of Compensation Packages** Clearly articulate not only salary figures but also the substantial non-monetary benefits—such as food, accommodation, additional leave, and family support—that are commonly provided in the Northern Cattle Industry. This transparency will help potential recruits and their families better understand the true value of working in the sector and may shift perceptions about remuneration.

- **Promote Positive Perceptions and Modern Realities** Invest in public relations campaigns, educational initiatives, and collaboration with schools and universities to reshape outdated stereotypes about agricultural work. Highlight the technological advancements, diverse career paths, and rewarding lifestyle opportunities available in the industry. Engage parents as well as students to foster broader support for agricultural careers.

- **Foster Collaboration Across Industry, Government, and Education** Strengthen partnerships between agricultural organisations, government bodies, and educational institutions to align training programs with industry needs. Support career fairs, internships, apprenticeships, and hands-on educational experiences that expose individuals to the variety of roles within the industry.

- **Learn from International Best Practices** Study and adapt successful strategies from other countries, such as the USA and Canada, where positive cultural narratives, school programs, and unique staff incentives have improved attraction and retention. Consider offering opportunities for employees to run their own livestock or horses and provide flexible benefits that foster inclusion and job satisfaction.

- **Innovate for Retention and Career Development** Create pathways for career progression, training, and skill development. Encourage businesses to diversify operations to match the interests and aspirations of current and future staff, especially in generational family farms. Offer incentives such as additional leave, opportunities for personal enterprise, and supportive workplace culture to increase staff loyalty and longevity.

- **Address Workforce Data Gaps** Advocate for improved reporting and data collection on workforce trends, turnover, and hiring in the Northern Cattle Industry. Reliable data will enable more targeted strategies and help measure the effectiveness of attraction and retention initiatives.

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