



## **Bullet-proof strategies for retaining logging employees**

*By Tony Kryzanowski*

One of the most bizarre employee stories I've heard recently was about a processor operator who quit, but didn't bother to tell his employer that he was quitting. Two weeks later, he re-surfaced—working for another contractor.

But that's not the end of the story. Six months later, the employee has the gall to return and ask for his job back because it turned out that the grass wasn't as green with the other logging contractor as he had thought.

My guess is that many Canadian logging contractors can relate to this story and have at least one that's similar in their back pockets.

One of the biggest complaints I hear in my travels—particularly among logging contractors—is how difficult it is to find and retain good operators. Compounding the problem is that according to the Forest Products Association of Canada (FPAC), the Canadian forest industry will need to hire at least 60,000 workers by 2020, to replace 40,000 people lost to retirement and another 20,000 needed to grow the industry.

Furthermore, the Conference Board of Canada says the industry's 160,000 strong workforce is older than average because of downsizing over the last decade.

I have visited with over 100 logging contractors of various kinds in my travels. Over time, I have seen a number of work environments, and based on my experience, there are some strategies that seem almost bullet-proof for retaining good employees.

While I often hear contractors blame other industries for stealing employees they have trained by offering them more money, overall, I'd have to say that losing employees to the size of a paycheque is largely a myth.

Yes, every contractor will lose some employees to the oil and gas and mining industries because of money, and the faster individual contractors accept that fact, the better. The fact is, though, that when offered a good work environment in forestry—particularly close to someone's hometown—the industry has also demonstrated that it can attract employees that are generally less transient away from those industries.

Here are a few suggestions based on my experience that seem to work particularly well at retaining good employees.

**Blood Is Thicker Than Water** – The best way I've seen for logging contractors to develop a workforce with very little turnover is to involve as many quality family members as possible as operators, mechanics and management. It seems that family ties have a way of building closer relationships between owners and employees that go beyond the employer/employee bond. However, the downside is that if the family member isn't cut out for forestry, you, as the owner, have to let them go. This makes it tough if it is a son or daughter. The best approach is to 'try them out' for about three months, with the understanding right upfront that if they are not working out, then they will have to go because you can't afford to keep them on.



Not Everyone Is In Love With Long Hours And Overtime – In most instances, employees often don't mind working longer hours like 12 to 14 hour days, especially in a camp situation, as long as there is a payback allowing them to spend time with spouses and family on the back end. Planning the work week is one of the most important jobs any owner has, and what seems to work best is knocking off by 1 pm on Friday, with no weekend work. While some logging contractors may scoff at this practice, researching operator productivity through organizations like FPIInnovations can be a real eye opener.

Help Quality Employees Become Owner/Operators – It's a mystery to me why more logging contractors don't use this option. Most say that developing a sub-contractor within their employee ranks makes them nervous because it gives the sub-contractor too much negotiating power over how much they are paid. Granted, this is a legitimate concern, but surely after working with an employee for five or ten years, doesn't an owner have a strong sense of their character?

The key is to pick the right employee in the right circumstances, such as someone with a young and growing family with a good head on their shoulders and a strong sense of business management. The upsides of this arrangement far outweigh the downsides, and one of the greatest benefits is that the logging contractor may actually be developing the person who will buy them out eventually.

From my perspective, these are the top three strategies that work best to retain employees. But here's a final word on one often ignored issue—the camp. Keep it clean, pay the money to attract a good cook, and keep the camp within an hour-and-a-half, if possible, from home or a major urban centre.