



# AGRICULTURAL APPOINTMENTS

Finding the right people since 1979

## 2023 SALARY & TREND REPORT



# FOREWORD

In this 2023 Salary and Trend Report, we look at some of the major issues facing the search for talent in the agriculture and agribusiness sectors, including salary and industry trends. We will also report on an important survey that we have conducted across our candidate database, to determine the necessary requirements to attract people to live and work in regional and remote areas. With increasing demand for skilled workers in Australian agriculture, we explore the prospect of immigrants as a source of labour.

Finally, we pay tribute to the founders of Agricultural Appointments, Tim Vidler, and Andrew Preston. Tim and Andrew had a vision of the type of recruitment company that would be required by the agricultural sector. They paved the way for future success over a 30-year period, where they demonstrated the power of having a specialist agricultural recruitment company. We are fortunate to share the words of advice from Tim Vidler at the end of our report, as the business continues to go from strength to strength after a decade under new owners, Dr. Ray Johnson and Brett Price.



Brett Price and Dr. Ray Johnson

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# KEY TRENDS SHAPING THE AGRIFOOD TALENT POOL



There have been massive changes in the global and local Australian recruitment industry since the start of the COVID pandemic. For the first time in almost 50 years, Australia's unemployment rate dropped to just 3.4%, putting immense pressure on businesses to recruit new employees as they scrambled to meet supply demands. This is happening in all industries including agriculture and agribusiness.

We have also witnessed a generational change in working habits, with employees working from home and shifting jobs more regularly. At the end of 2022, SEEK announced that the top keyword search on their platform was "work from home", beating both role title and location searches.

Competition for candidates has been a significant difficulty for employers for quite some time, with most being aware of the increasing skills shortages suffered by the agricultural industry for many years now. Since mid-pandemic, employee demands and attitudes shifted to the 'new normal' ways of working and changes in the economy. Many businesses began to feel the stress of hiring in a candidate short market.

The ABS reported ([www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)) that 1.3 million people changed jobs during the twelve months ending February 2022, equating to a job mobility rate of 9.5% of all employed people changing jobs during the year. This was the highest rate of job mobility since 2012 in a year, higher than the previous estimate for the year ending February 2022 (7.5%) and slightly lower than the year ending February 2012 (10.5%).

The RBA found the main reason people left for a new role in the year leading up to February 2022 was because they wanted a better job or wanted a career change. This was an increase of more than 11 percentage points from 21.7% to 33%. "Poor work arrangements, pay or hours" was the second most common reason people left for a new role at 12.5% – a 2% increase from the previous year.

These trends now shape the dynamics of the talent pool in Australia, for all business sectors including agribusiness. There is little doubt that the major skills shortages in Australian agribusiness will be exacerbated by these new trends.

# JOB DEMAND AND TALENT AVAILABILITY



In the agriculture and agribusiness industry in Australia, there has been a massive tightening of candidate supply and a huge surge in employers trying to find staff since the start of the COVID pandemic in 2020.

SEEK data released in January 2023 showed that for the Farming/Agriculture sector, the job ad index was 522 relative to that of 2013 (Index 100 = 2013), shown in Figure 1. It shows that the number of job ads being placed in this sector is now running above 5 times the level of 2013, which is a staggering statistic.

Our experience is that we have had to advertise roles at least 2-3 times in an effort to secure relevant candidates, and that the effectiveness of online advertising continued to diminish. So a combination of factors, higher demand due to continued expansion in agricultural industries, candidate shortages leading to companies increasing their online advertising, and many roles requiring multiple repeats, have caused the huge upsurge in online advertising.

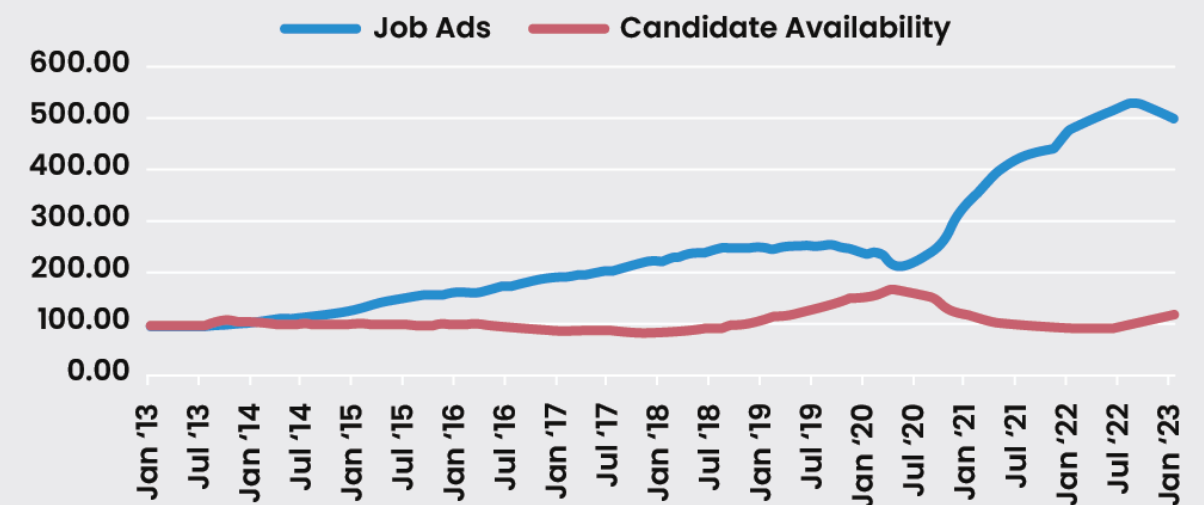
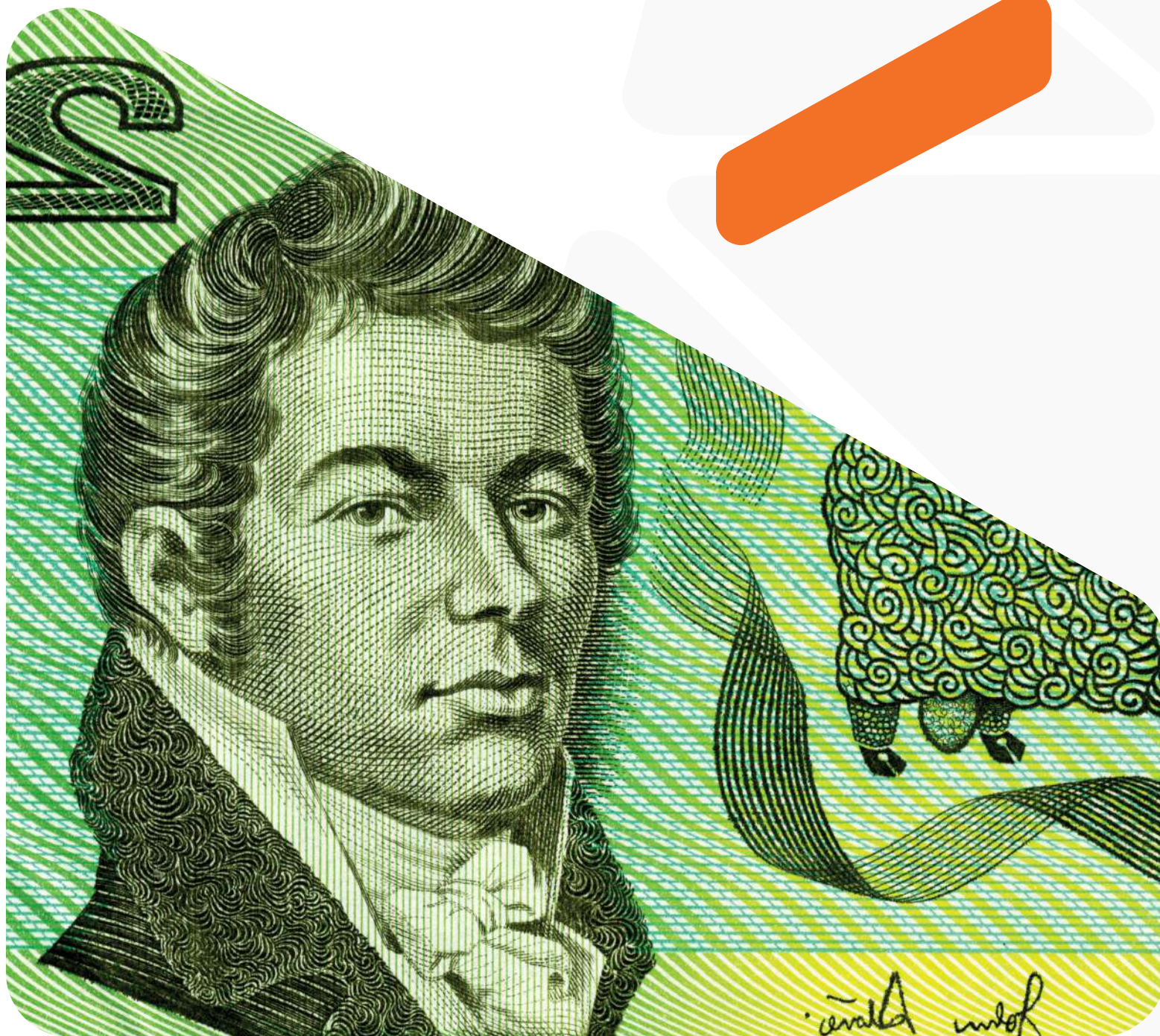


Figure 1. Seek advertisements and candidate availability for the Farming, Animals & Conservation Sector for July 2013 to December 2022, relative to 2013 (Index 100=2013).

This market has highlighted the need for specialist recruitment companies such as Agricultural Appointments, who have expertise in working directly in the agriculture and agribusiness sectors. This means that we know how to find people and we have the networks to build communication with the right people. Accordingly, our "Successful Placement Rate" has continued to be very high at 98.5%, although some roles are definitely taking longer to recruit than in previous years.

# SALARY TRENDS IN AUSTRALIAN AGRICULTURE AND AGRIBUSINESS



In our 2022 Salary and Trend Report, we identified that the average salary in the agricultural industry has increased over the last ten years by approximately 1.3% per annum. This is shown in Figure 2 below, from the advertised relative salary levels in the SEEK Farm jobs category from 2012 to 2021 (SEEK Salary Report 2021). This rate of salary increase was about half the average inflation rate of around 2% per annum. In real terms, this has indicated that agricultural and farming salaries have not increased over the last decade in Australia, when adjusted for inflation. Indeed, this has been a feature across the entire Australian employment sector (Australian Parliament Library, 2019).

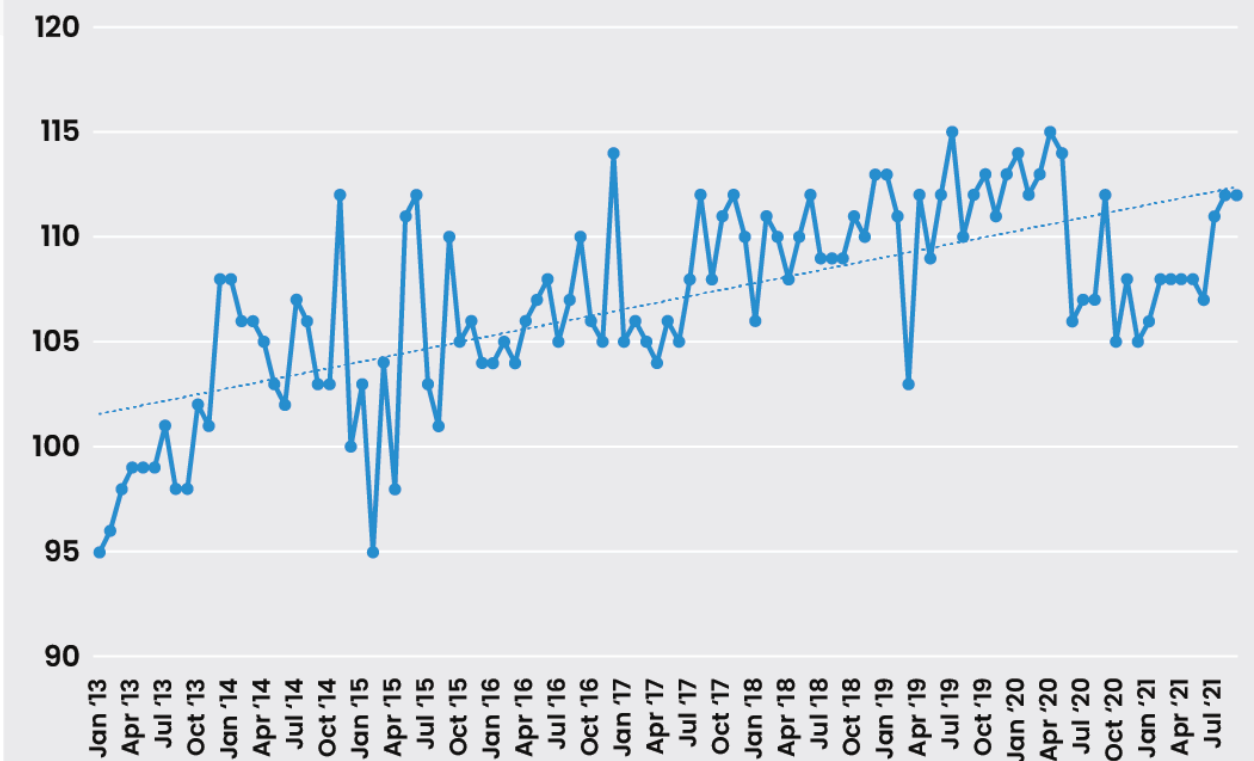


Figure 2. Average advertised relative salary levels in the SEEK Farming jobs category from 2012 to September 2021 (Index is 100=2012) (SEEK Salary Report, 2021)

In reports just released by SEEK in January 2023 ([www.seek.com.au](http://www.seek.com.au)), it is evident that there have been significant increases in salary levels following the immediate adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figures 2 and 3).

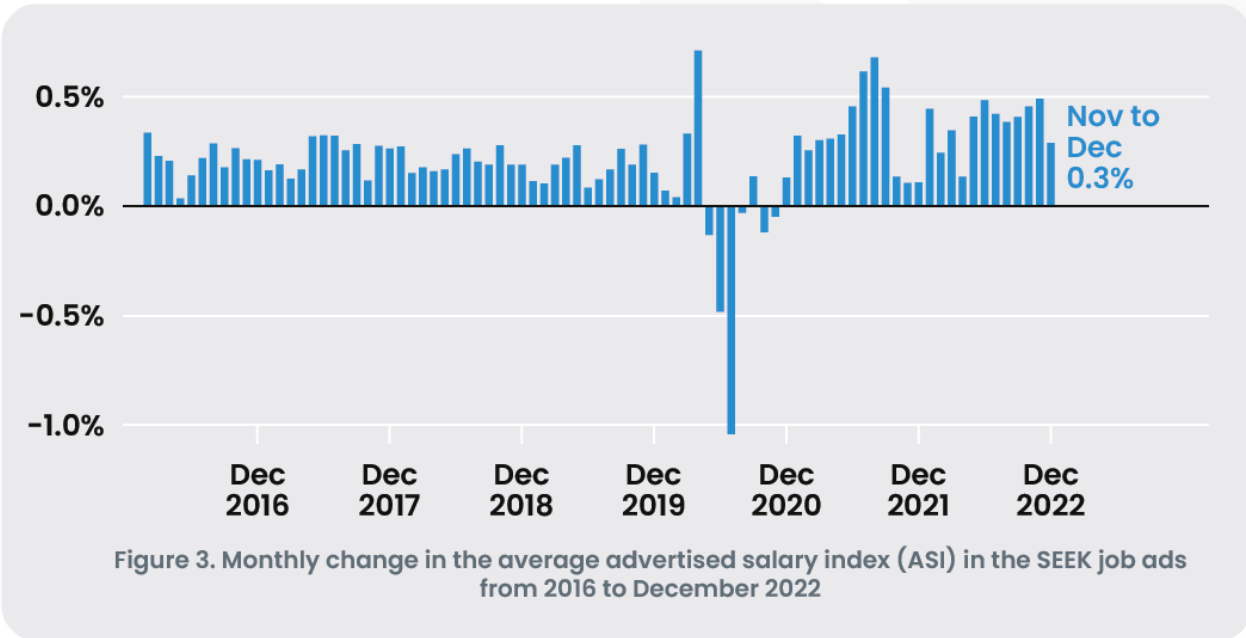
Overall, the SEEK Ad Index (ASI) increased by 4.1% from July 2021 to July 2022 and the SEEK Salary Index rose 4.7% over the year to December 2022, indicating that the increasing salaries were being sustained as we enter 2023.

SEEK Senior Economist Matt Cowgill, says:

“The month-on-month gains in advertised salary slowed a touch in December, falling from 0.5 to 0.3 per cent (Figure 3). This is the slowest month-on-month rise since April and may be an early sign that advertised salary growth is moving away from its peak.

“However, advertised salaries are still growing at the fastest annual pace on record, rising by 4.7% over the year, based on SEEK ASI data dating back to 2016 (Figure 4).

“This has been fed into by the tight labour market – with unemployment near a 50-year low – creating a bidding war for talent, as well as the rising cost of living driving salaries up.”

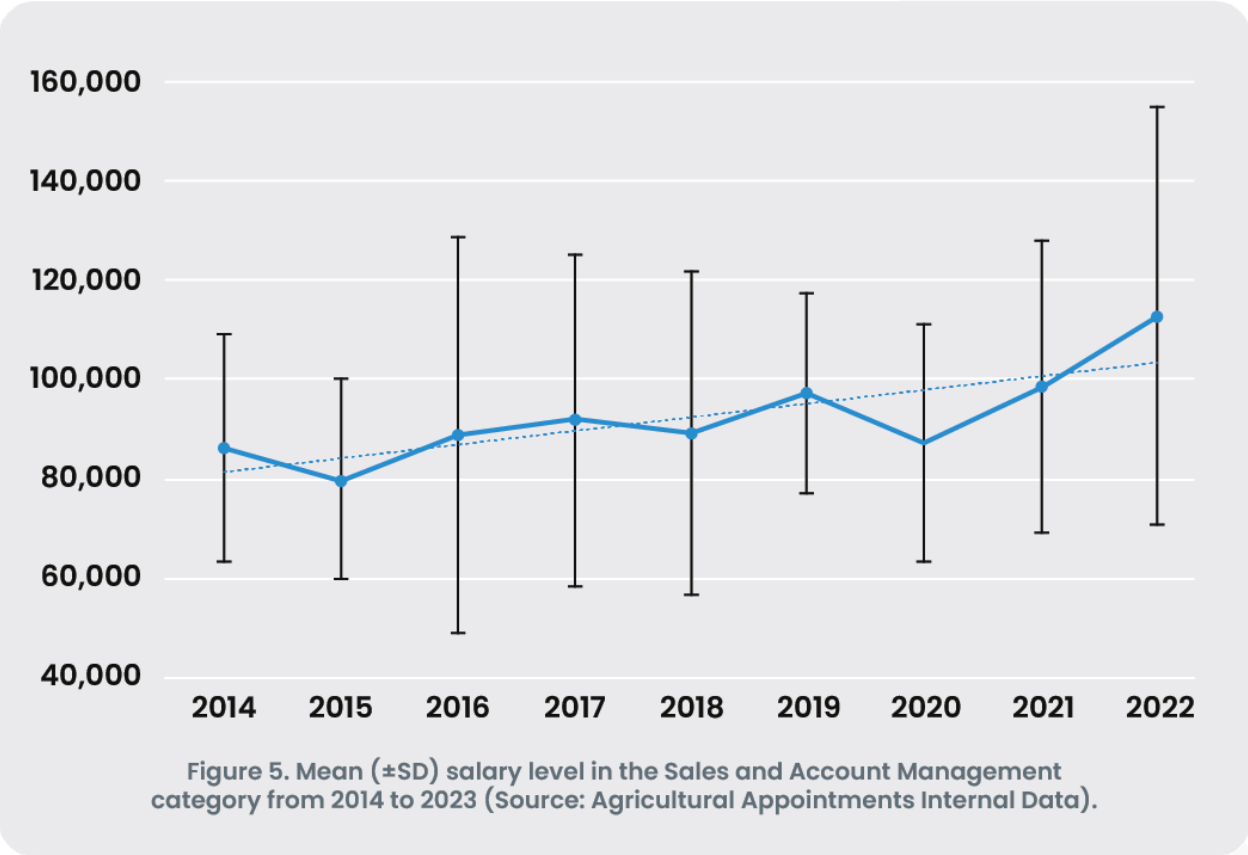


In the Farming, Animals & Conservation sector, there is also evidence of increasing wages and salaries, based on the SEEK information, shown in Table 1 below.

| INDUSTRY                        | ROLE             | SALARY GROWTH | AVERAGE SALARY |
|---------------------------------|------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Farming, Animals & Conservation | Agronomist       | 6%            | \$84,939       |
| Farming, Animals & Conservation | Animal Attendant | 6%            | \$51,119       |
| Farming, Animals & Conservation | Farm Manager     | 10%           | \$88,089       |
| Farming, Animals & Conservation | Farmhand         | 5%            | \$57,392       |
| Farming, Animals & Conservation | Groomer          | 11%           | \$55,872       |
| Farming, Animals & Conservation | Labourer         | 21%           | \$62,136       |
| Farming, Animals & Conservation | Machine Operator | 7%            | \$66,995       |
| Farming, Animals & Conservation | Nurse            | 4%            | \$58,176       |
| Farming, Animals & Conservation | Ranger           | 4%            | \$70,271       |
| Farming, Animals & Conservation | Stockperson      | 1%            | \$60,984       |
| Farming, Animals & Conservation | Veterinarian     | 9%            | \$97,695       |

Table 1. % Growth of annual salaries in the Australian agricultural industry.  
Source: SEEK based on average annual full time and annualised hourly salaries (excluding contract roles) for job ads in Farming, Animals & Conservation classification, listed on SEEK from Nov 21-Feb 22 compared to Nov 19-Feb 20.

Our own internal data agrees with the SEEK information. Our core category of placements in the agribusiness sector is in Sales and Account Management. We observed a significant change in salary levels of many appointments in this category from 2017 to 2023 (Figure 5 below) whereby the average salary level increased over 30% from \$86,150 in 2014 to \$112,875 in 2022.



If you would like to get more insights about the current salary trends in Australian Agriculture, please reach out to our team on 02 9223 9944 or [resume@agri.com.au](mailto:resume@agri.com.au).

# THE CODE TO UNLOCK THE SUPPLY OF CANDIDATES TO REGIONAL ROLES



The single biggest issue facing agribusiness today is a shortage of skills and labour. Most agribusinesses are under enormous strain trying to find the right people for various important roles within their organisation, and this is placing a significant handbrake on the economic growth of many agribusinesses across Australia.

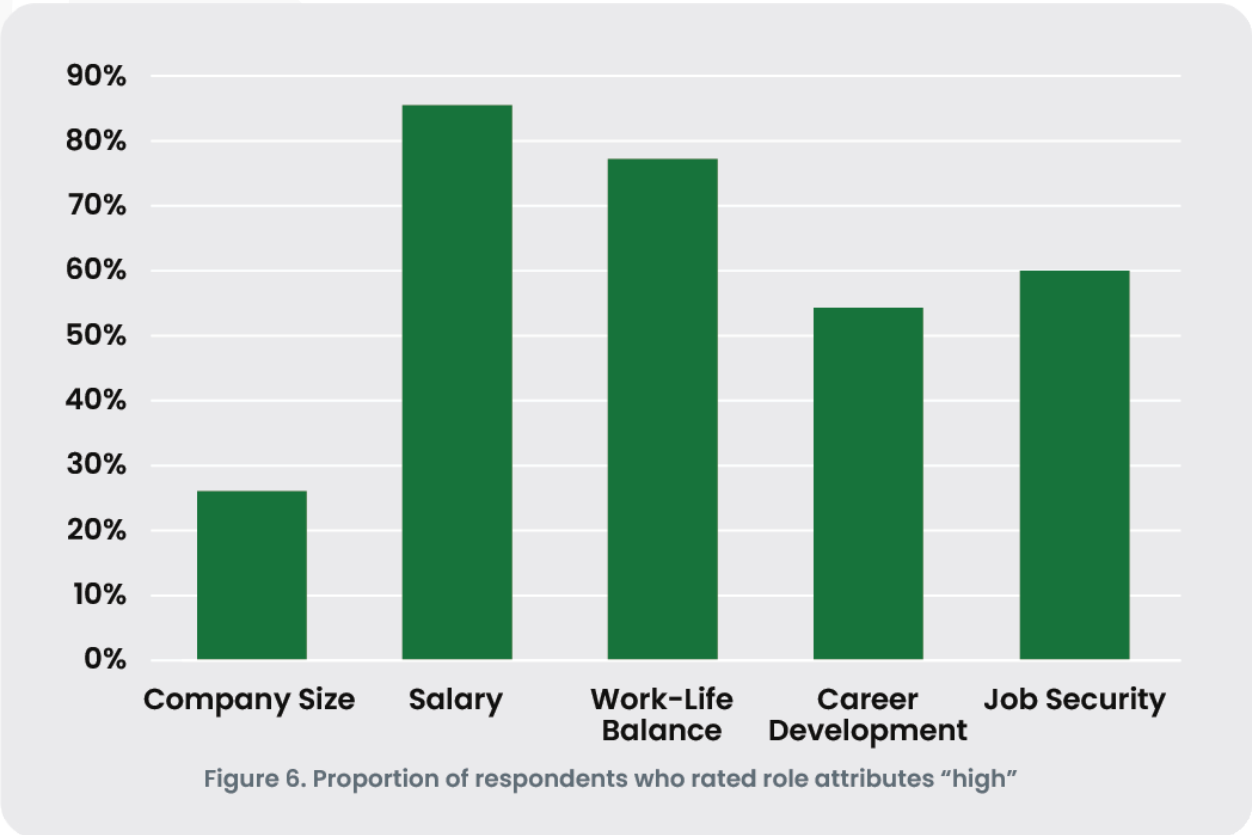
In fact, most company managers who we speak to regularly are telling us that they are struggling to find the right people to fill several roles within their business. This skills and labour shortage is exacerbated in areas outside of major city centres.

Agricultural Appointments is a specialist agribusiness recruitment company, so most of our roles are regionally located. We were interested in finding out exactly what the key factors were for persuading candidates to move to regional locations. To determine this, we conducted an online survey of over 2000 candidates from our own database and received 217 responses.

The statistics of the responses we received are as follows:

- |                              |                                                             |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Gender                    | 85% Male, 15% Female                                        |
| 2. Age                       | Less than 44 years old, 48%; greater than 44 years old, 52% |
| 3. Married                   | 70% were married with children                              |
| 4. Birthplace                | Australian-born, 69%; Overseas-born, 41%                    |
| 5. Are Currently living      | City/Urban 41%, Regional/Rural, 59%                         |
| 6. Regional or Urban born    | 65% grew up on the land or regionally                       |
| 7. Seniority of current role | 75% were at mid-senior level, 8% were Entry Level           |

In terms of the key attributes of a role that were in a regional area, we asked candidates to rate them on a scale from Low to High. This has identified the two key areas that potential candidates look for in a regional role, namely salary level and work-life balance (Figure 6), where 85% of respondents ranked Salary Level as High, and 79% of respondents ranked Work-Life Balance as High.



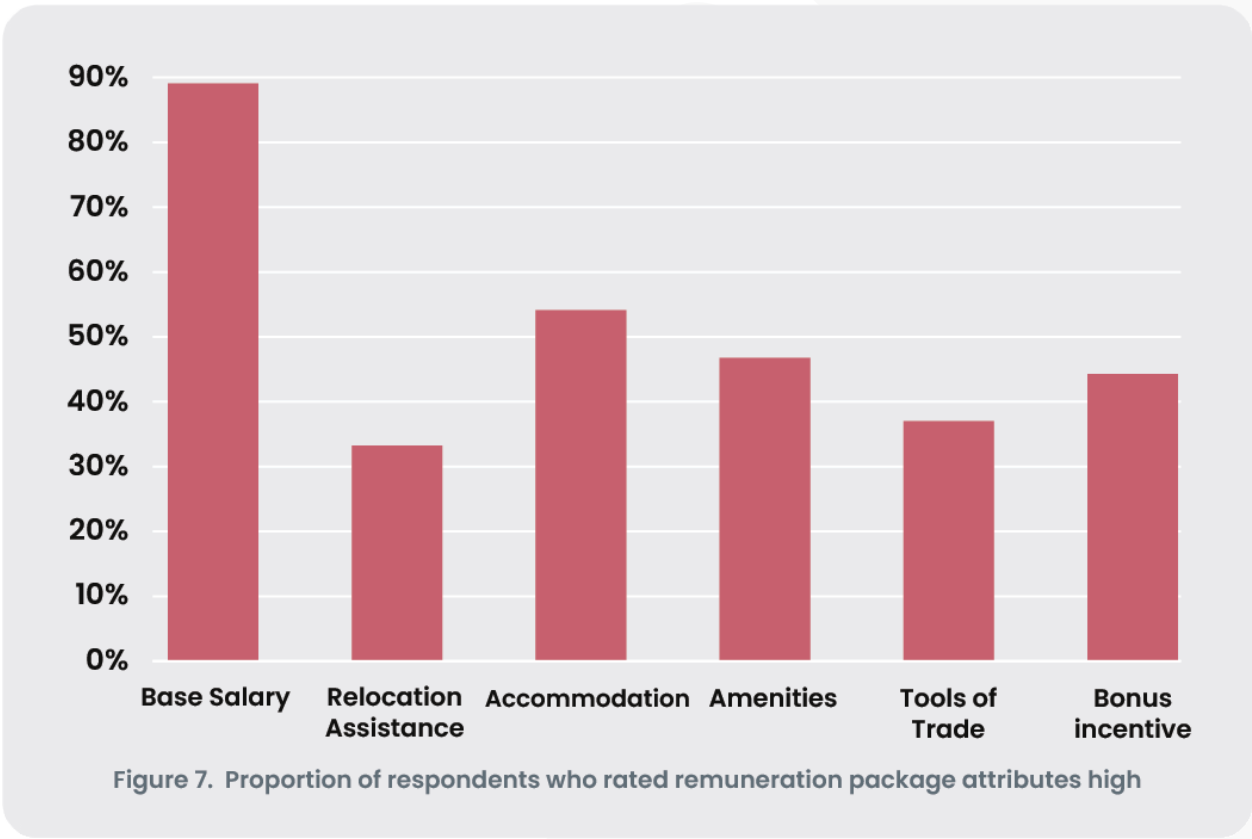
As most of the respondents – 85% of whom were male – grew up in regional or rural areas, with nearly half of them being over 44 years old and married with children, the importance of having good pay and a healthy work-life balance was clear.

Interestingly, respondents had mixed feelings about the size of the company involved, despite rating career development and job security quite highly. This is good news for the many agrotechnology start-up companies increasingly working from a regional location.

In terms of the overall remuneration package, our survey results (Figure 6) showed that an attractive salary level was by far the single biggest influencer for candidates considering regional roles. Respondents also attributed a lot of importance to the work-life balance when thinking about taking a job in a regional area.

It is not surprising that living within a rural or remote environment offers employees greater opportunity and flexibility to find the right balance between their personal and professional lives than the significant constraints of traditionally urban roles.

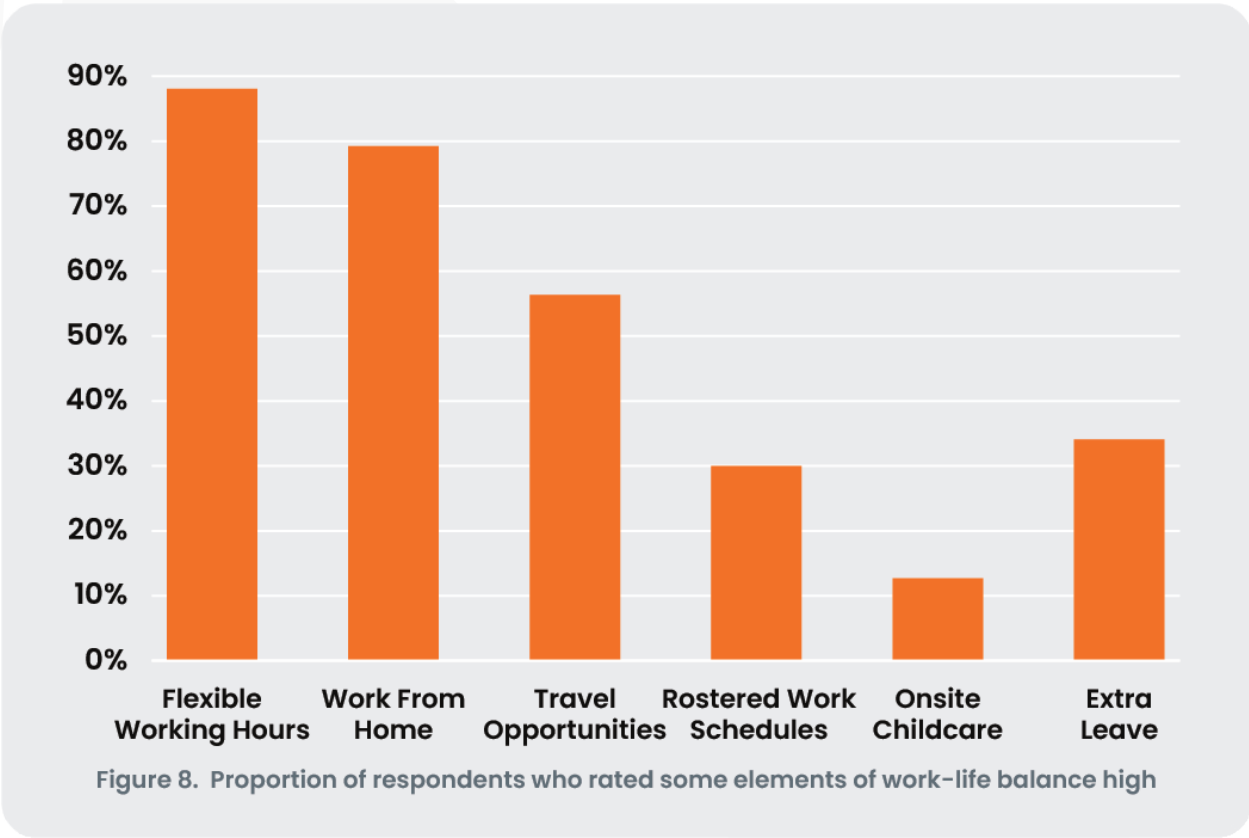
We were also interested in how remuneration might be assembled, potentially as a mixture of base salary and other items such as relocation assistance, accommodation, amenities, tools of trade and bonuses. Results are shown in Figure 7.



Again, we found that Base Salary was the primary concern of most candidates, with factors such as accommodation and bonus incentives not being a top priority.

We also dissected the other major issue for candidates which was work-life balance, as we wanted to understand what elements of this were considered important.

The results showed that the major elements of work-life balance were flexible working hours and the ability to work from home (Figure 8).



So, with these findings in mind, how can Australian agribusinesses attract ideal candidates to take up regional roles?

Firstly, they need to offer competitive salaries that match or exceed urban salaries. It's important to remember that many potential candidates have families, and so offering competitive pay and benefits will give them more incentive to move.

Secondly, agribusinesses should offer flexible working arrangements that allow employees to have a greater work-life balance. This means allowing them to work from home or offering flexible hours that fit around their family commitments.

It is also very important for agribusiness to promote the benefits of regional living. This is particularly important for potential candidates who may not have grown up in regional or rural areas. Focusing on the lifestyle and benefits of living in a more relaxed, natural environment can help to sway candidates who may be hesitant about making the move.

But salary level is the code to unlock a candidate's willingness to move to regional locations. It is the biggest influencer for candidates considering regional roles. Agribusinesses need to be willing to pay a competitive salary to attract the right candidates. This can be achieved by benchmarking against other companies in similar regions and industries.

Agribusinesses need to recognise that they are directly competing with urban companies for skilled candidates. Offering competitive salaries and benefits, as well as promoting the lifestyle benefits of regional living, can help to make regional roles more attractive, and help the company to ultimately hire the best candidate for the position.

## ARE IMMIGRANTS A SOLUTION TO THE SKILLS SHORTAGE IN AUSTRALIAN AGRICULTURE?



There is every reason to believe that demand for skilled workers in agriculture will increase in the future. In 2014, The Business Council of Australia classified agriculture as one of the five most likely business sectors to succeed on a global scale. The National Farmers Federation has affirmed a similar view by signalling its intention to grow the industry to \$100 billion by 2030. Future industry growth, however, will be dependent on availability of the required pool of skills and capability to fuel that growth.

Regrettably, it is now widely accepted that the Australian agricultural sector faces a persistent and near critical skills shortage in both skilled and unskilled labour. For the past 10 to 20 years, there has consistently been many more jobs available in agriculture than qualified candidates, but Australia's peak food industry bodies have now estimated that the food supply chain is short of at least 172 000 workers from paddock to plate. This massive labour shortage will have significant long-term impacts on price and availability of food for consumers unless solutions are found.

## SUPPLY OF LOCAL WORKFORCE

The traditional source of workforce for agriculture (for both on-farm and agribusiness) has been around the employment of those who have themselves grown up on farms, the sons and daughters of farmers. Declining interest in agriculture as a career has seen this source diminish over recent decades. In addition, demand has changed with an increase in technical skills to meet new and emerging technologies, such as precision agriculture, chemicals, traceability, genetic modification, and robotics. Such changes have led to increasing demand for graduates, but the numbers of those graduating annually in agriculture/agribusiness related courses is relatively stable at around 800 to 900. This number of graduates is grossly inadequate to meet the demand of around 3,000 to 4,000 positions available to graduates a year, leaving a shortfall of, at the very least, around 2,000 unfilled graduate positions per year.

Although in recent years, some progress has been made in increasing student enrolments in agricultural related courses, there is a general belief that such increases will have little impact on the existing large shortfall in the supply of graduates. Nor is it expected that workers already living regionally will increase in numbers. Historical trends indicate a general migration of workers from regional areas to live in the major coastal cities to find employment. City trained professionals are also not inclined to accept employment in regional areas, so are not a likely source of skilled labour for agriculture in Australia. The evidence appears to indicate that there is little hope of closing the gap in skilled labour from the sources outlined above, in the short to medium term. The only likely solution may lie in a quiet revolution that has been taking place in Australia over the last decade.

## EMPLOYMENT OF IMMIGRANTS IS ON THE RISE IN THE REGIONS

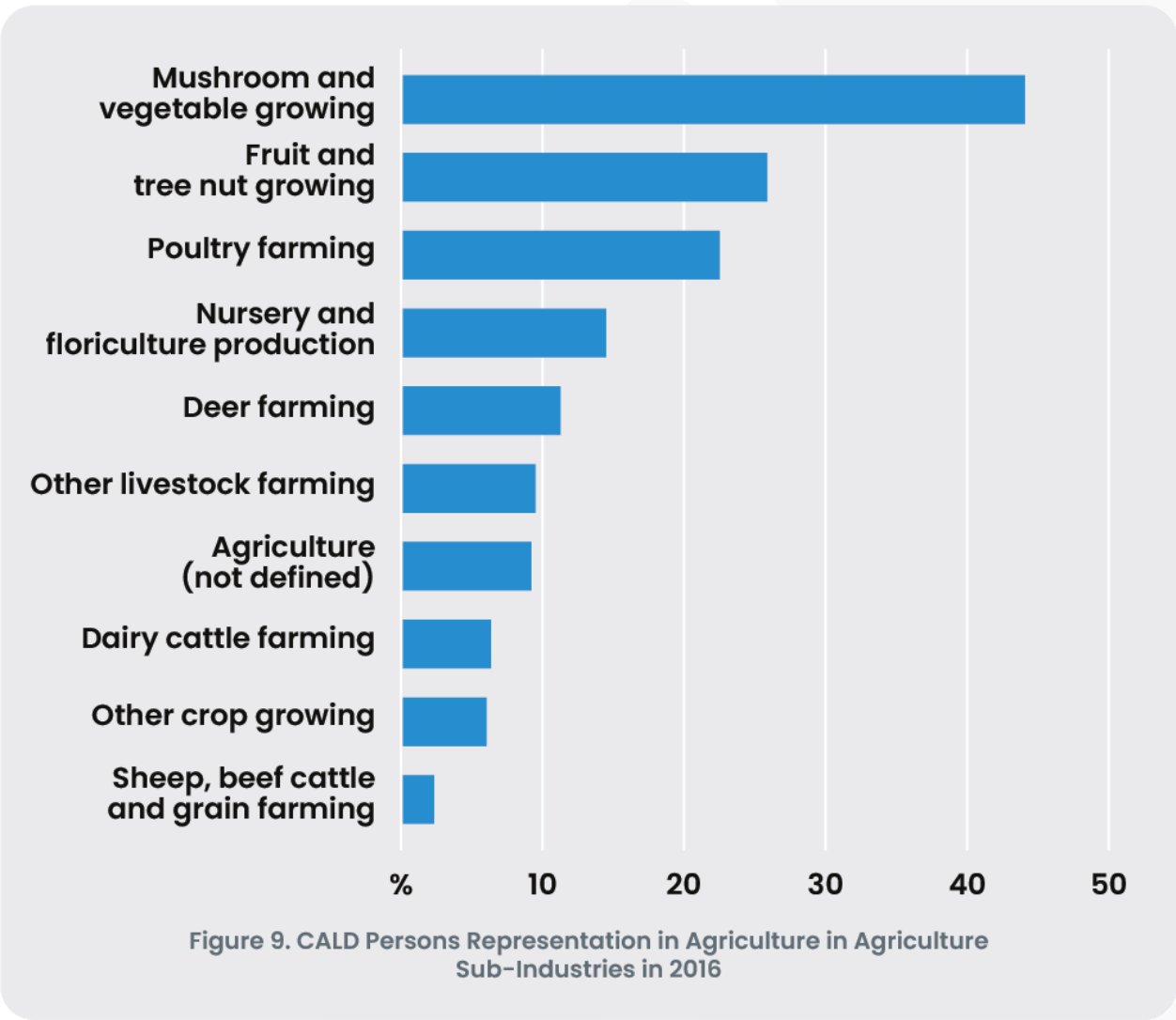
Faced with a desperate shortage of local staff, several sectors in the agricultural industry have turned to immigrants to fill the void.

The government has achieved some success with their initiatives to provide additional workers to agriculture, particularly in the areas of skilled and semi-skilled workers. The Australian Labour Motility (PALM) scheme was introduced as a pilot program in 2008, allowing Pacific Islanders to work in low skilled jobs in Australia on a seasonal basis. In June 2023 it is expected that 35,000 PALM workers will be in Australia. In addition, Working Holiday Makers (backpackers) and those entering the country under Temporary Migration visas have become an important source of unskilled labour in the agricultural sector. They provide a large and valuable mobile workforce that helps meet seasonal demand for agricultural workers, particularly at planting and harvest time, making an important contribution to profitability and productivity of agriculture. They also provide labour for hard-to-fill jobs in rural and remote areas. Since 2005, those who undertake work in agriculture, mining, or construction in regional Australia, may apply for a second Working Holiday visa, which has seen an increase in the uptake of such work.

SKILLED MIGRANTS ARE INCREASINGLY OPEN TO RURAL EMPLOYMENT

Whilst most immigrants to Australia have traditionally settled in the cities, this century has seen a trend develop with more immigrants directed to regional and rural Australia than previously has been the case. Employees in agriculture from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds (immigrants) are on the increase, representing 11% of those employed in agriculture in 2016 compared to 8.56% with CALD backgrounds in 2011 (an increase of 28.5% over five years). Nearly half of those surveyed in 2016 were recent immigrants, as indicated by the fact that they were still living overseas 5 years beforehand.

The sub-industries leading this trend of employing immigrants are mushroom and vegetable growing, fruit and tree nut growing, poultry farming, and nursery and floriculture, shown in Figure 9.



A study by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation in 2016 was undertaken to understand the impact that immigrants have made to redressing labour shortages in the industry, and to assist in future policy planning to improve productivity in the industry. The conclusions from the study are that recent efforts to open new visa pathways for permanent and temporary immigrants to settle in the Australian bush has been successful for the immigrants themselves, for rural and regional Australia in general, and for the Australian agricultural sector.

Federal government policy has opened permanent and temporary visa pathways. For permanent immigrants, entry is via a points test system, where points are allocated for factors such as an applicant’s age, education and qualification, employment experience and English language experience. Additional points are provided for those who agree to settle in regional and rural Australia.

Skilled immigrants from UK, South-Africa and Zimbabwe, India, the Philippines, and Thailand have a higher representation in the agricultural sector than other birthplace groups. Around 70% of those surveyed decided to immigrate to Australia to gain employment, or to join family who had previously immigrated.

VISA OPTIONS FOR AGRICULTURAL BUSINESSES

A range of visa options are now offered to facilitate the process of hiring overseas workers. The relatively new Subclass 400 visa enables temporary skilled workers to enter the country on a short-term basis for up to 6 months. Once employed, they can then launch self-sponsored PR pathways via applications under subclass 482 or 492. Another benefit of the 400 visa is that approval can take as little as 4 weeks, compared to approval for some other options which can take up to 3 or 4 months.



Agricultural Appointments was formed in 1979. Initially filling farm management positions for corporate agriculture, the business has since grown and broadened its scope to finding skilled personnel across the breadth of the food and fibre supply chain, from Farm Managers to middle management positions, right up to Managing Directors and CEO's. Today, Agricultural Appointments is one of the most recognised brands, and a leading provider in agribusiness recruitment. This reputation is based on a solid foundation of agricultural expertise, guided from the outset by early director Tim Vidler.

Tim was a Sydney boy enticed to agriculture by holidays on a property at Walcha and in 1965, after completing studies at Hawkesbury Agricultural College, he launched his career on Gurley Station at Moree. At the time, Gurley was the largest wheat cropping property in the world (with 25,000 acres) and it attracted the attention of Dalgety which bought the station as part of its pastoral expansion. Tim remained with Dalgety for the next decade first in NSW, central Queensland, then eventually the UK, where he turned his focus to staffing.

In 1978, Tim returned to Australia as the NSW Personnel Manager for Dalgety, and soon found that good employees were hard to find. Dalgety contracted Malcolm Priestly, who in 1979 had registered the name Agricultural Appointments, and Tim was an eager student. "Malcolm was honest, and he worked hard to find the right people for the job, especially in hard-to-fill areas such as Moree and Griffith," Tim says.

"His business was expanding and in 1982 he asked me to come on board as a partner." Agricultural Appointments was officially launched.

In the early 1980s, recruitment meant newspaper advertising, including the Saturday editions of the daily papers and specialist rural weeklies and country papers. "We quickly established a presence and were prominent because we didn't do anything else – just agriculture and agribusiness. In those days, about 60% of our business was sales/marketing, 20% specialists and professionals, and 20% on-farm," Tim recalls.

"I'd make it easy for potential employees by encouraging phone inquiries on Sunday mornings. I'd put on a pot of coffee and the business program [on television] and wait for the phone to ring. Of course, advertising jobs was just one side of it. We'd have to sell ourselves to potential clients, who'd initially say no, but after failing to find someone themselves, would call us in. You really had to market your business."

Over the years, the corporate structure of Agricultural Appointments changed to reflect diversification into food services, with new partners coming and going. Malcolm left the business in 1995. Throughout it all, being agricultural specialists kept the company strong.

"We weren't jack of all trades; we were master of one. All our partners had agricultural backgrounds and knew what they were talking about. That's important because it gave us a feeling for the industry and made us culturally appropriate."

Tim says the company's success was because all staff recognised the importance of "...being professional, listening more than talking and trusting your instincts – especially when culling candidates."

Ray Johnson and Brett Price purchased the Agricultural Appointments business in 2013 from Tim and his business partners. Ray says, "Tim provided an extraordinary foundation for us to build upon. He had an enormous network in the industry and was widely respected. The methods used to find people have since changed significantly with web-based advertising superseding print and the rise of social media, but Tim's philosophy of employing specialist recruiters who have themselves had careers in the agrifood industry, remains with us today as a vital point of difference over our competitors".



# AGRICULTURAL APPOINTMENTS

Finding the right people since 1979

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