

# More than HIRED HANDS

*Working in agriculture isn't just a labor of love anymore.*

*by Megan Silveira, assistant editor*

The page is still crisp, the corners of its pale white surface not creased with dog-ears. Neat black print covers most of the classified section, describing long hours of grueling work in less-than-favorable weather. The list of opportunities is long, but the stack of applications is not.

It's a narrative Jake Scott, sales and marketing at Krebs Ranch, says has gone on for too long.

"We as owners and employers looking for employees do a horrible job of marketing ourselves," he says.

Scott describes want ads as laughable nowadays — the work just doesn't sound appealing, especially from the viewpoint of the young agriculturists who want to fill these roles.

The hours can be long, the work can be hard and the weather can be challenging. Yet focusing on the negative isn't the way to solve the current labor issues, Scott says. He has seen both sides of the story — he's done his time finding his own positions in the cattle industry, and now

as a team member at Krebs Ranch, he's looking to hire new faces.

We need to change the story of a "hired hand." His generation is paycheck-driven, but this new group of future leaders in the industry wants more: culture.

"People want to feel like they're a part of something bigger than themselves. It's not just driving the feed wagon anymore — you're a part of feeding people," Scott explains. "We need an intentional culture of who we are, how we want to be, how we want to treat employees."

## The hire

His boots were new, the leather not yet stained with the toils of the industry. Though he had yet to touch a cow for the first time, Ian Kane had never felt as excited as he was on his first day at a Kansas feedlot.

The 23-year-old grew up in the city, but during his time at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, he



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realized he craved a purpose bigger than bringing home an impressive salary. Money was important to establish a future, but his dreams were actually centered around the mark he could leave on the world.

“I was looking for a career profession that I felt like I would get some of the non-tangible factors out of — being passionate about it, feeling like I was making a difference,” he explains. “I didn’t just want to show up to work and be there because I had to be. I wanted to actually enjoy what I was doing, and feel like I was doing something worthwhile.”

After scouring job-search platforms like LinkedIn, reaching out to professors at his campus and conducting his own research online, Kane discovered the agriculture industry. In addition to the practical sense that there clearly were a lot of job options available to choose from, the work seemed like it would check off a lot of boxes on his list of demands.

Kane dove in headfirst, cold calling a few operations that stood out. Long phone calls that felt more like chats

with friends than job interviews led to an internship.

“Growing up, the American cowboy was the iconic symbol of the American dream. In my mind, I connected them with traits such as courage, honesty, toughness, dependability — they were larger than life,” Kane explains. “When I realized having a career working in the cattle industry was a possibility, I was excited for a chance to be a part of this legacy.”

Today, Kane’s boots are scuffed and worn, the shoes displaying time spent around livestock. He completed multiple internships across the country, spending time at feedlots and seedstock operations in beef cattle hotspots like Nebraska, Oregon and South Carolina.

This fall he’s in Saint Joseph, Mo., exploring breed association work as the regional manager intern at the American Angus Association.

With each experience, Kane says he’s making human connections that are helping secure his future success in the industry as well as creating friendships that will last a lifetime.

Scott says Kane is doing exactly what it takes to get a foot in the door in the ag realm, even without a background in agriculture.

“If you want to be in a career, you need to be around people in the industry,” he explains. “Put yourself in the same proximity, and I guarantee you that you will find an opportunity. This is a target-rich environment right now for people wanting a job in agriculture.”

That’s good news for up-and-coming ag workers. There’s a plethora of choices right now, and Scott says it’s

*Continued on page 46*



## NAVIGATING DEMANDS IN AN INTERVIEW

The culture is established, the connection made in the first round of interviews. Now how do both parties talk about the nitty-gritty?

The world of negotiations seems hush-hush when it comes to salary and benefits, but Jake Scott of Krebs Ranch says it's a conversation that should be easy to have, so long as it's done the right way.

Just like how you don't talk about marriage on the first date, Scott says interviewees shouldn't bring up salary or benefits right away.

"Be patient," he says. "You'll get paid something, so don't jump the gun. It's a turn-off if it's brought up in the first interview."

Salaries themselves shouldn't just be looked at as a paycheck. With agriculture work, it's common for hires to be provided with some sort of housing arrangements, a vehicle and a freezer full of beef year-round.

Cost savings should be looked at as part of the salary package, Scott says.

"Hardly any other industry can offer something like that: a home where you work, and a nice home in the country, at that," he says. "There's no better lifestyle. It's laid back, it's peaceful. It's a huge benefit that can't be overlooked."

Ability for hybrid work, vacation time and other benefits are other considerations.

Beyond the "bonuses," Scott reminds young people to consider living expenses when comparing salaries. The cost of life in rural America is likely much lower than it would be in a big city, so differences in pay might actually balance out.

Conversations about insurance can be a little trickier. With smaller ranches, Scott says it's a big ask to provide health insurance or 401k packages to employees.

With persistence, however, Scott's team has found a way to offer both. He encourages producers to talk with different companies and find the program that fits their operation and their employees.

Scott says employers should prepare to let their hires have a life outside of work. When young people ask for vacation days or weekends off, he suggests producers find a way to make it work.

There's a sense of pride in his voice as he describes how the ranch cares for those who care for their cattle. He considers their help to be more than just a name on payroll. They're family, and Scott is proud to treat them as such.

"We want good, long-term, healthy relationships with our employees. We want them to retire comfortably, and with some dignity," he explains.

not just a college degree that can help them achieve the titles they're desiring.

"College is good, but it's not the paper that creates worth in an individual," he explains.

Applicants are no longer being penalized like they once were for having a smaller resumé or a two-year degree. It's a new trend in the field, and one Scott anticipates will continue.

Personality and teachability are the biggest draws to a job candidate.

"I think the biggest thing is attitude and work ethic," Scott says. "I think what young people will find, is if they just have those basic character qualities, the operation is ready to teach you what you need to know."

Kane humbly says that's the mentality he's always approached career opportunities with.

"Even if you don't really know a whole lot, people out there are willing to give you a chance," he explains. "They'll try to teach you as best they can what you need to know for their operations."

Being a blank slate in regards to cattle and agriculture is actually something Kane's learned to look at as a strength.

"If you're coming from outside the industry, you don't really have any bad habits," he says with a small laugh. "Folks can kind of mold you to how they want you to work on their operations."

It's a truth employers are starting to see, too.

"Character trumps experience right now. I think there's enough demand for labor right now," Scott says. "You need common sense to keep yourself and others safe. If you've got savvy and you're teachable, then you can make it."

### The boss

When it comes to raising cattle, growing crops — ultimately feeding the planet — employers share a common goal. They want to hire good people.

"I think anyone can look like a stud on one interview," Scott explains. "Give them more opportunities to develop questions. Learn more about them. Flush out concerns. Slowing down and taking a breath and being real intentional in your interview process is something we can do to make sure we're hiring the right people."

In Scott's mind, the wrong hire can destroy an organization's progress; while finding the perfect piece to the puzzle can add to team morale, increase productivity and further establish a company's authenticity.

That's a big deal.

“People have a great nose for authenticity. They can smell it when it’s there, and they can smell it when it ain’t,” Scott explains. “It has to be real. It needs to be ingrained on your operation and be in your DNA.”

It’s a mindset he finds lacking in the industry. Outside of the agriculture world, the newest generation in the workforce has companies offering more than just a pretty salary — they’re selling themselves as places of work where their employees can make a lasting difference. It’s a shift in attitude Scott hopes the agricultural sector can make.

Cattlemen are busy feeding bulls and fixing fence and completing their never-ending to-do lists, Scott says, but failing to define their culture as a company can be detrimental.

While it’s his generation’s biggest focus, even Kane admits culture can be hard to pinpoint.

“I think you’ll get 10 different answers if you ask 10 different people,” he says. “I would say for me, workplace culture would be about the values, not only those that are stated by the organization, but what you can actually see demonstrated.”

Beyond the company’s ability to put their mission statement to use, Kane also says culture is about the type of employees already hired. Do they trust each other? Do they have positive interactions with one another?

“How do you feel coming to work?” Kane asks. “Are you

excited to come to work? Do you feel like you’re engaged in your work?”

Whatever a company labels as culture, Scott says it has to be a reality, not just a few pretty words strung together for a mushy social media post.

“It can’t be b.s. You’re going to have to make changes in your own organization first to make it a reality for your employees,” Scott says. “[Employees] want something they can buy into and believe in.”

This new demand for culture stems from trust in the workplace. Kane says people his age want to feel comfortable with their bosses. They want respectful, caring mentors running organizations. These characteristics help create a good working relationship. A good working relationship leads to a sense of trust. Teamwork is built on the back of that trust.

This industry is a beautiful picture of passion, honor and pride that comes with demanding work hours. The classified section can’t tell the story of how we interact with one another, with employees, with livestock, with consumers.

It’s time to rewrite the story of a hired hand, to make sure employees on an agriculture operation know their worth, know that they’re part of a family with a purpose.

“People are not pieces of equipment,” Scott says. “I’m more than a hired hand. I have a heart. I have a mind. I have a soul.” 

