

Challenges We Faced as Foreign Workers

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■ Introduction

Due to the ever increasing demand on labour in the “hot” economy of Alberta and fewer people wanting to go into pig business, producers started to hire people from overseas a few years ago. Alberta Pig Company (APC) and Sunterra Farms Ltd have been bringing over unskilled workers, as well as skilled workers, mostly from Mexico and the Philippines. There are also a few people from Belarus, Chile, Germany, Russia and the UK, working for the companies (**Table 1**). About half of the farm staff in both companies are from overseas.

Table 1. Nationality of workers employed by Sunterra and APC, 2008

	Sunterra Farms	APC
Canada	38	18
Mexico	11	7
Philippines	6	9
UK	7	
Germany	2	
Chile	1	
Ukraine	1	
Columbia	1	
Russia		1
Belarus		1
Denmark		3

Both of us started working for the companies in the middle of 2007. Vitaly Sergeev (from Russia) started to work for APC as a farrowing technician in the APC Poundmaker unit, and Thomas Jacob (from Germany) started to manage Sunterra Farms' boar stud.

■ Challenges Faced by Foreign Workers

Both of us agree that we enjoy living and working here in Alberta. But thinking about when we arrived here, things were quite different, as we did not know what we could expect in a new country.

Finding the Job

Thomas learned about the job at Sunterra Farms because he had some contacts with the company that he made a few years ago at the Banff Pork Seminar. There is nothing more important than having personal contacts and a good people-network. Employers and people interested in the pig business should take the opportunity of getting to know people wherever they have the chance.

Because not too many people have the chance to visit an international conference on pig production, the best way to get in touch with people is the Internet. There are quite a few websites with good job-postings, such as the www.thepigsite.com, www.agcareers.com, www.albertapork.com, and the list continues once you start browsing the "world wide web".

Vitaly saw APC's posting on www.Thepigworld.co.uk and sent in a resume. A few weeks later he had his job offer. Therefore, getting to know about the job seemed to be the easiest part for both of us.

Work Permit-Application

After getting our job offers we had to face the second challenge. Because we were coming from another country we could not work in Canada without a work permit, so we had to apply for this. We were lucky that both companies provided us the paperwork we needed, so we just had to get our documents together for the application. Because both APC and Sunterra Farms had experience with foreign workers everything went pretty smoothly. Altogether, we had to send the following documents:

- Labour market opinion for the job from the company
- Job offer from the company including wages, job description and work hours

- Proof that the company would pay the flight to Canada and, if necessary, back into the candidate's home country (only applies to low skilled jobs)
- Passport or (certified) passport copy
- Proof of work experience from former employers (Note: may require a certified translation)
- A permit application form including family information
- Proof of payment of the processing fee
- Some countries also require you to apply for a TRV (Temporary resident visa) along with the work permit.

Because requirements differ in every country, potential applicants should check with their closest Canadian embassy. After sending these papers, processing times can vary between 2 months to more than a year.

Settling Down

After we had our visa, we thought the most difficult part was solved. But, compared to the rest of the story it was relatively easy until this point. Once we arrived in Canada we had to deal with more difficult things than the visa application. These included: finding affordable accommodation, opening a bank account and getting a Canadian driver's license. Again we were lucky that APC and Sunterra Farms helped us especially in the beginning, as we did not really know where to go and what to do. The most important things to mention are:

- Accommodation
- Social Insurance Number (SIN)
- Alberta Health Care Insurance
- Bank Account
- Mail service
- Transportation/ Driver's license
- Shopping
- Learning the English language through special courses

APC and Sunterra Farms also assisted us really well with finding adequate accommodation. Vitaly shares an apartment with some coworkers from the same unit. That gave him quite an advantage during settling down because he could ask the others where to go shopping and they helped getting to know the area and town. Thomas does not live in town; he lives on-site at the farm where he is working. Both of us concluded that living in town might be better for going out and getting to know people. However, living on site has its advantages such as walking to work rather than driving.

Besides all the administrative thing, we got quite a bit of help from our coworkers, such as, where to get things the cheapest. This comes in very handy when you have to set up your accommodation from scratch. Without our companies' and co-workers' help it would have been much harder for sure.

■ Challenges We Had To Face

We really appreciate the support of our companies. But despite the good start we still had some problems, as the first few months showed us. Because the companies helped us a lot our start was really good. But there are many issues you would never think of, if you have not been in this situation. We had to face a few other challenges during the first months in Canada. Some things to mention are:

- Finding an affordable way to keep in touch with family members at home
- Finding a good family doctor and dentist
- Getting to know distances and climate
- No credit history
- No driving history

Because we did not have a family doctor the first few months, we had to go to the emergency in the hospital. They told us there about the waiting lists you need for your family doctor, because there are not enough doctors in Alberta. It took us quite a bit of time, but with advice from friends and luck we found our current doctor and dentist. But as far as from a health standard Canada is comparable with Europe.

Although Alberta is quite a nice province to live in, the biggest difference was the huge distance's you have to travel, even when you want to go shopping. However, the province also has a lot of pros, such as wide-open space. Although the temperatures in the wintertime are quite cold, we also enjoy this time of the year. Especially, because we usually have sun and the cold weather in combination with snow, this gives you good opportunities to do winter sports.

Another thing to mention is credit availability. If you have not been living in Canada before, you will not have any records on credit availability. Although you may have had a credit card in your home country, it may take a long time to get a new one in Canada. To finance bigger things, such as car loans or mortgages for a house, you usually will need a co-signer, even if you have quite a bit of cash flow.

If we were to do this again, there would be a few things we would organize better before, such as getting a driver's abstract, as well as a statement from the previous car insurance. If you have this information, most insurance companies will give you lower premiums, compared to starting from zero and paying the highest premium.

Communicating Overseas

Because we both have family and friends in our home countries, we were looking for an affordable way to communicate overseas. There are a few things to mention that are quite affordable such as:

- Long distance calling cards (around 4 cents a minute)
- Long Distance plans for your landline (better when you call a lot)
- Email (Internet must be accessible)
- Skype (high speed Internet required)

The problem with having Internet when you are living on a farm is that you might not get High Speed Internet. There are a few providers that offer Internet via Satellite or the cell phone network. But these are still quite expensive.

■ Conclusion

Looking back, it was quite a challenge getting set up to work here in Canada. Without the help of our employers it would have been even harder. The applicants also must be prepared well and think of all the necessary paperwork and not just rely on other people.

When companies think about hiring people from overseas they have to keep in mind that they also have to take good care of them as new Canadians. Companies will not be able to keep good staff from foreign countries if they do not feel comfortable in Canada. Therefore, the employers need to take care of the essentials, such as accommodation, administrative things and support the workers whenever they need help.

After living here more than a year, we will try to stay longer because we have found that Alberta is a nice province to live in.

■ References

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