

# GILE Journal of Skills Development

## Reflections on Effective Employee Development from New Entrants to the UK Agriculture and Agri-food Sector

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### Abstract

In the context of workforce challenges in UK agriculture and agri-food, workplace employee development could be a critical tool for developing human capital that supports individual and organisational success. This research aimed to enhance understanding of how those entering UK agricultural and agri-food employment from non-agricultural backgrounds perceived the employee development that they experienced in their first role in the sector. A mixed methods approach incorporating a survey and semi-structured interviews was used followed by statistical and thematic evaluation. The research found that informal employee development was highly valued for professional development but formal development was perceived to have more impact on performance in role. Participants praised mentoring and opportunities for informal communication, while development processes such as induction and performance review were perceived less positively. Overall, this research shows that supporting managers to develop their own skillset and knowledge on employee development, will help to create workplace environments where new entrants from non-agricultural backgrounds can be individually supported to learn, engage and develop. The article concludes with recommendations focused on mentoring schemes, informal employee development, and guidance for sector managers, which could support employee development in the UK agriculture and agri-food sector.

**Keywords:** employee development, skills development, agriculture, agri-food

### 1. Introduction

Across agri-food and agriculture, there is a recognised need for better training, learning and development (Defra, 2022; Morley, 2016; Nye & Lobley, 2021; Swadling, 2018). These industries face challenges in relation to securing and sustaining their workforce to ensure future stability, both across Europe (Zabko & Tisenkops, 2022) and specifically in the UK (ALP, 2022; Prince et al., 2022). Workplace employee development is recognised as a critical component of organisational and individual success (Dachner et al., 2021; Manuti et al., 2015; Martini & Cavenago, 2016) via the development of human capital (Dachner et al., 2021; Noe et al., 2014). However, there has been relatively little exploration of effective employee development in agriculture and agri-food.

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An initial literature review incorporates research on employee development from varied contexts, alongside agricultural and agri-food studies, focusing on research applicable to the UK's unique food production and agricultural ecosystem (Dastagiri, 2017). The paper then evaluates the results of a specific research study considering how those entering UK agricultural and agri-food employment from non-agricultural backgrounds perceive employee development experienced in their first role in the sector, before drawing together conclusions and recommendations for practice.

## **2. Literature Review**

A literature search in refereed English language journals and books on the subject of employee learning and development in agricultural and agri-food employment was carried out, with a focus on publications from the last 10 years. Due to the scarcity of publications in this space, the timeframe was subsequently extended to 15 years, and a grey literature search was also carried out. Grey literature typically includes “information produced on all levels of government, academia, business and industry” (Mering, 2018, p.238) and is incorporated in this review to increase scope and reduce bias (Paez, 2017). Online website searches of agriculture and agri-food sector bodies, charities and educators, and relevant government departments, were completed. Publications identified in these searches were then critically evaluated using the AACODS (Authority, Accuracy, Coverage, Objectivity, Date, Significance) grey literature checklist (White et al., 2013). All six criteria had to be met for inclusion.

### **2.1. Agri-food and Agriculture in the UK**

#### *2.1.1. Sector overview*

Christiansen et al. (2020) described the agri-food sector through its relationship to agriculture; agri-food encompasses agriculture itself along with “related up- and down-stream activities in input supply, food logistics, food processing, retail, and food services” (p.1). Four million UK jobs are attributed to the wider agri-food industry (13% of UK workforce employment); within this, the agricultural workforce comprises 11% of the agri-food sector (Defra, 2022).

Across agri-food worker shortages have caused concern and calls for urgent action (Development Economics, 2017; Grant Thornton, 2021; Nye & Lobley, 2021). Sector bodies have requested government support (ALP, 2022; FDSC, 2019) and the need for further research within agri-food employment has been identified in multiple reports and studies (Hasnain et al., 2020; Heasman & Morley, 2016; Nye & Lobley, 2021). The House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee acknowledged the scale of the issue, and the mental health and wellbeing risk for those working in the sector (EFRA Committee, 2022). 49% of UK food growers and manufacturers rationalised output due to labour shortages (ALP, 2022) and 24% of employees in food production, agriculture and animal care were planning to leave their job within the next year (City & Guilds, 2022).

#### *2.1.2. Recruitment, development and retention challenges*

In this context of worker shortages and retention challenges, it is vital to support and develop new entrants. New entrant is a poorly defined term but typically includes anyone new to the industry and excludes successors to existing farm businesses (Creaney et al., 2023). New entrants can experience multiple barriers to entry and challenges to retention (Toogood et al.,

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2025). Many do not know enough about agri-food to consider it as a potential career path (Ashworth, 2022), others may have dated views of the sector (Heasman & Morley, 2016; Nye & Lobley, 2021). Insularity can further limit recruitment; 42% of farmers are reluctant to employ staff without prior agricultural experience (Nye et al., 2023).

Access to training and skills development for those not already in the sector can be limited (Jack et al., 2019; Welsh Government, 2019). This situation has persisted for many years, Slee et al. (2008) identified the same barriers. Some shortcomings in staff training, learning and development have been recognised across agriculture and agri-food (Heasman & Morley, 2016; Nye & Lobley, 2021; Swadling, 2018) limiting the skills and development of staff, and ultimately, their progression.

### *2.1.3. Diversity, inclusion and belonging*

New entrants may also experience a lack of relatable role models (Ashworth, 2022). Agriculture, in particular, lacks diversity (Norrie, 2017) and structural racism has been identified (Terry, 2023) along with persistent heteronormative gender and sexual dynamics (Leslie et al., 2019). However, there is potential for change, with organisations such as Agrespect (2025) working to support rural diversity and inclusion and challenge prejudice.

When finance, land, advice and training are all potentially handed down generations in farming, it creates additional challenges (Jack et al., 2019; Welsh Government, 2019), particularly when trying to build social and cultural career capital (Sutherland & Calo, 2020). This challenge is worsened for groups with less likelihood of inheriting land due to structural inequalities (Terry, 2023).

While there is a primary moral and societal obligation for organisations to be diverse and inclusive, as well as a legal requirement, there are also demonstratable business benefits. There are signs that inclusion correlates positively with business performance outcomes (Whiting, 2021, pp. 6–7). The Food and Drink Federation (2021) highlighted that diverse and inclusive agri-food workplaces have better decision-making and innovation, increased profits, and enhancements to reputation, talent pool and retention. Belonging at work is important to employee health (Thissen et al., 2023). When employees feel that they can be themselves at work there is a positive impact on productivity, and when they feel accepted they are more likely to stay with an organisation (Blau et al., 2023).

## **2.2. Employee Development Principles, Processes and Practices**

### *2.2.1. Employee development principles*

When new entrants overcome barriers to begin a career in agriculture or agri-food, employee development will be crucial to developing a sense of belonging, and skills for success.

Employee development brings mutual benefits to the employee and organisation and should thus be conceptualised as a joint responsibility, enhancing the individual's ability to perform in their existing, or future, role within an organisation or sector (Dachner et al., 2021). Formal training and education, informal training and learning through developmental tasks and experiences in the role, and learning from professional relationships and networks are all part of employee development (Noe et al., 2014) supporting the development of social and cultural career capital (Martini & Cavenago, 2016). All elements of employee development are important, whether formal or informal (Felstead & Unwin, 2016; Manuti et al., 2015).

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### 2.2.2. *Induction*

Induction should be tailored to the individual and role, with a focus on both socialisation and alignment with organisational objectives (Antonacopoulou & Güttel, 2010). One-size-fits-all approaches may not work, particularly for more inexperienced recruits (Johnson and Burden, 2003) and ongoing managerial support is required (Woodrow & Guest, 2020). Goal setting supports employees to identify targets and progress; for new employees this should focus on learning and new skills and include continuous feedback and progress monitoring (Wietrak et al., 2021).

### 2.2.3. *Continuous employee development*

As the employee journey goes on, continuous development positively impacts employee engagement and retention (Rubenstein et al., 2017), career success (Martini & Cavenago, 2016) and supports organisational learning (Johnson & Burden, 2003). However, many employers do not use evidence-informed employee development practices (Crowley & Overton, 2021); agricultural and agri-food studies have suggested this may be connected to the complexity of measuring the impact of learning and development (Adams et al., 2021). To support more effective measurement, administrative functions should be separated from developmental elements in performance reviews (CIPD, 2016; Wietrak et al., 2021). This is also recommended following studies on agricultural students and employees (Adams et al., 2021; Kolstrup, 2012).

In agriculture, particular barriers to ongoing employee development include time constraints, cost, and finding suitable training providers (Nye et al., 2023). Studies have observed specific sector benefits arising from employee development; improving cotton workers' confidence in their skills had a positive impact on engagement and improved connection to farming values (McDonald, 2017), and online supervisor training benefitted worker safety and wellbeing (Rohlman et al., 2021).

### 2.2.4. *Co-workers, community and networks*

Co-workers influence can significantly affect the integration of newcomers (Antonacopoulou & Güttel, 2010) and the transfer of tacit knowledge (Peroune, 2007). Mutually beneficial relationships support knowledge sharing in line with social exchange theory (Mehner, et al., 2024). This can be a challenge for new employees (CMI, 2021) and potentially exacerbated in the context of new entrants to agriculture and agri-food, who may need to learn farming community 'rules' (Sutherland & Calo, 2020) as well as those of their organisation and role. Strong peer support and workplace communication positively impact employee integration and motivation (Wietrak et al., 2021) developing trust and psychological safety (Plouffe et al., 2023), but where this is lacking it can lead to isolation and increased turnover (Rubenstein et al., 2017; Sahai et al., 2020).

Additional organic support networks may develop from workplace peer groups, or via groups participating in training or qualifications. Networks and community may also collectively support workplace psychological safety, encouraging employees to seek and share information, enhancing overall motivation and performance (Plouffe et al., 2023; Wietrak et al., 2021).

### 2.2.5. *Mentoring*

Mentoring has positive effects on compensation, promotion, and career satisfaction (Allen et al., 2004) and facilitates informal and personal learning (Noe et al., 2014) while also supporting understanding of workplace social and cultural aspects (Johnson & Burden, 2003). The latter is

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particularly important for new entrants to agriculture (Sutherland & Calo, 2020; Žabko & Tisenkopfs, 2022).

### 2.2.6. *The role of leaders and managers*

Workplace learning and development rely on leaders and managers who commit to their prioritisation, and the creation of a learning culture at work (Felsted & Unwin, 2016; Martini & Cavenago, 2016; Noe et al., 2014). Leadership and management are recognised as distinct but overlapping concepts. Adams et al. (2021) offer a pragmatic approach to defining leadership and management in agriculture and related areas “in order to be an effective leader or manager, improvement in both is necessary and unavoidable” (p. 7). Leadership and organisational climate also affect employee retention (Rubenstein et al., 2017) with good supervisory support and recognition enhancing employee motivation and commitment (Wietrak et al., 2021). Supervisory behaviours and high-trust environments can also support employee performance and wellbeing (Nielsen et al., 2017) and mediate and reduce workplace isolation (Sahai et al., 2020) a common issue in agricultural settings (Wheeler et al., 2022).

The majority of UK managers have not had any formal management and leadership training; ‘accidental managers’ are common nationwide and in agri-food (CMI, 2024; FDSC, 2019; Nye et al., 2023; Swadling, 2018). This lack of managerial training and experience can lead to sub-optimal or dangerous workplace practices, and affect staff satisfaction and retention (Nye & Lobley, 2021).

## 3. Research Aim and Questions

Given the sector-wide challenges, and limited evidence on good practice, this research reviewed the employee development experienced by those from a non-agricultural background who have entered agricultural or agri-food employment, to answer the question: **How do those entering UK agricultural and agri-food employment from non-agricultural backgrounds perceive the employee development experienced in their first role in the sector?**

The method and subsequent analysis incorporated two sub-questions: **How did employee development affect professional development?** and **How did employee development affect job performance?**

The researcher’s own context guided the topic and approach; coming from a non-agricultural background working in a primarily agricultural university, the topic was of personal interest.

## 4. Method

This research was underpinned by a broadly subjectivist epistemology, focusing on individuals, their stories and meaning. Participants therefore self-identified whether their background was non-agricultural, as there is no universal definition of non-agricultural or new entrant (Creaney et al., 2023). Quantitative survey data was collected, supported by qualitative interview data to support deeper understanding, and meaningful conclusions and recommendations (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). An interpretive paradigm and research philosophy applied; the intention of this research was to gain understanding and inform action (Saunders et al, 2019).

Inductive methods were used. After initial reviews, a survey focused on respondents’ first job in agriculture or agri-food that lasted for three months or more (to exclude short-term seasonal work). Respondents were asked to consider the impact of employee development in relation to them and

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their professional development, and in relation to their performance in the job. This was to elicit reflections on individually beneficial career capitals (human, social or psychological) developed, but also wider capital development supporting the organisation (Dachner et al. 2021).

The survey was piloted and refined, then circulated through agricultural and agri-food organisations, educational bodies, and social media. 129 people responded, two thirds were under the age of 35. Although widely shared, some groups were difficult to reach. The majority of responses came from England, despite promotion across the UK. Survey respondents were well-balanced by gender, but respondent sexual orientation and ethnic background were less diverse, perhaps reflecting the current make-up of the sector (Norrie, 2017; Terry, 2023). To counterbalance this, those invited to interview were selected both on their original response content, but also to allow deeper examination of experiences across a range of demographics. Interviewees from more diverse ethnic backgrounds and sexual orientation were included in the interview population.

The quantitative survey findings were evaluated and used to inform the design and pilot of semi-structured interview questions. The researcher designed questions which would prompt the interviewees to reflect on their agricultural or agri-food journey and the themes identified in the survey. Semi-structured interviews support understanding of the relationships between variables and allow clarification to aid researcher understanding (McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Saunders et al., 2019). In hindsight, a more robust approach to the areas identified as lower value in the survey and/or less common in agri-food should have been included. Although the findings and discussion explore a wide range of effective employee development, this could have been enriched further by deeper consideration of what was not taking place or working well. This reflection should be noted for further work in this area. The researcher should also have created additional open questions that would encourage the interviewee to explore wider themes. The focus on survey themes slightly limited this work, and potentially led to homogeneity of response, although it must be noted that not all themes identified in the survey were then explored in the interviews and vice versa; interviewees generally overlooked some existing themes such as induction, and chose to focus on themes less present in the surveys, such as sector belonging, or lack thereof.

A further limitation in the study method lies in the lack of sample stratification by agricultural subsector, organisation size, or type. The agricultural sector is highly diverse, with varying organisational structures, resources, and staff development practices. The absence of disaggregated analysis may therefore obscure important differences in the experiences of new entrants across these contexts. This limitation arose due to the relatively exploratory nature of the study. While the results offer valuable general insights, they should be interpreted with caution, particularly when considering their applicability to specific subsectors or organisation types. Future research would benefit from a stratified sampling approach to capture the nuanced experiences of different groups. This would allow for more targeted recommendations and a deeper understanding of how organisational and contextual characteristics influence new entrant development and support.

## **5. Results**

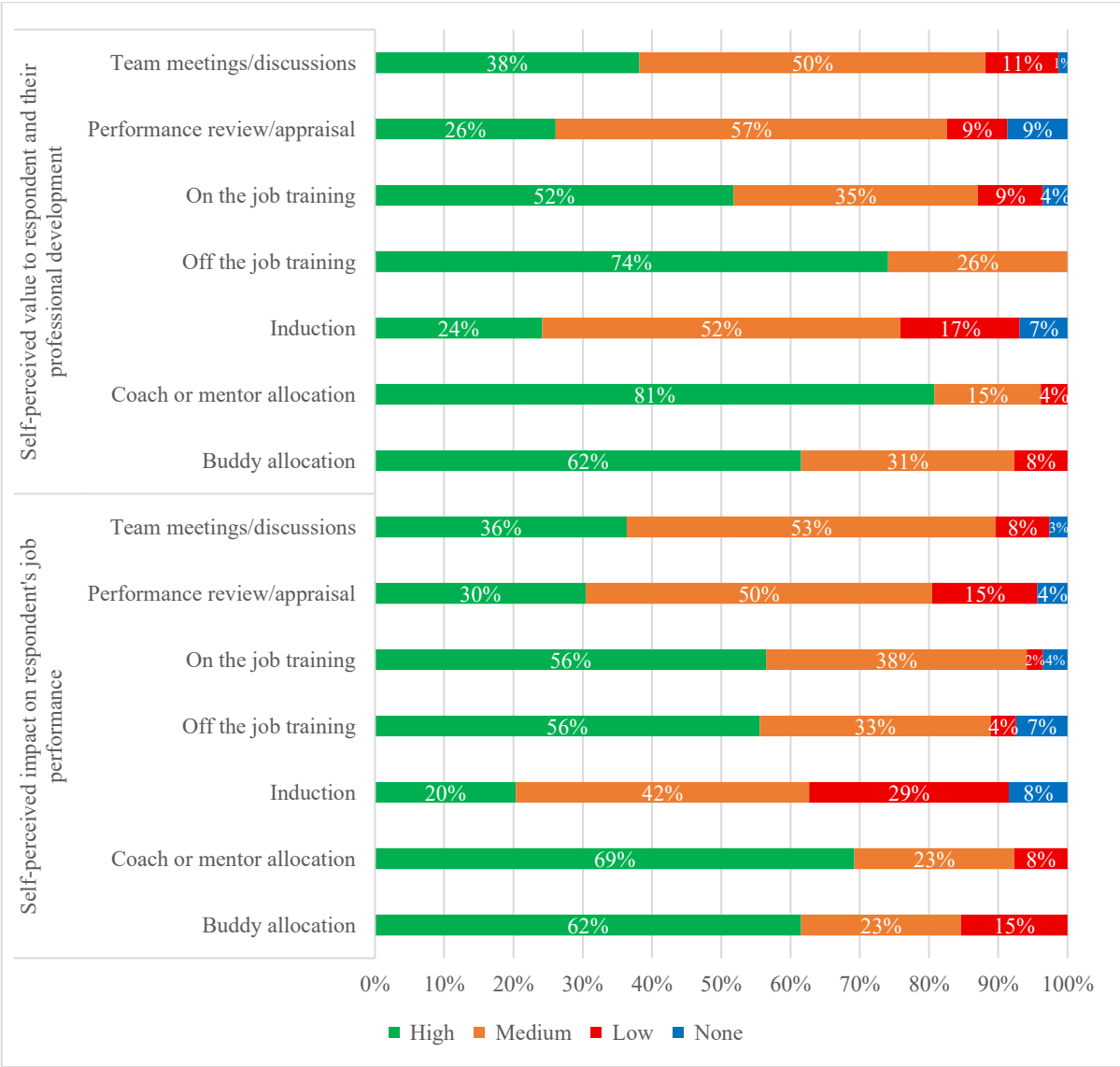
### **5.1. Survey Findings on Employee Development Provision and Impact**

106 survey respondents answered questions about development during their first role in agriculture or agri-food. They were asked about the type of development experienced and their perception of its value to them and their professional development (on a scale of high value, medium value, low

value, no value), and the perceived impact on their role performance (on a scale of high impact, medium impact, low impact, no impact). The results are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 illustrates that each type of employee development was overwhelmingly perceived as generally being of medium or high value, in relation to professional development., and shows a similar pattern of high and medium impact on performance.

FIGURE 1. SURVEY RESPONDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE VALUE AND IMPACT OF EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES



Source: own compilation/calculations

**5.2. Further Statistical Testing on Selected Survey Findings**

*5.2.1. Induction*

Induction had the lowest perceived impact and value. Statistical testing was therefore carried out on data collected on induction length, to see if this affected the respondents’ views.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the participants’ responses on the value of induction in relation to their professional development. Those with an induction period

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of one day or less were compared to those with an induction period of two days or more. The relation between these variables was significant,  $X^2(1, N = 58) = 11.519, p = .001, \phi = -0.45$ . There was a moderate negative association; those with two days or more were significantly more likely to report that induction had a high value for their professional development, than respondents with an induction period of one day or less.

The same comparison was made with reference to impact on performance, again using a chi-square test of independence. The relation between these variables was also significant,  $X^2(1, N = 59) = 8.503, p = .004, \phi = -0.38$ . Again, there was a moderate negative association; those with an induction period of two days or more were significantly more likely to report that induction had a high impact on their performance in the role, than respondents with an induction period of one day or less.

### 5.2.2. Team meetings

Survey respondents were also asked about the frequency of inclusion in team meetings and discussions. 39% were always included, and 34% were sometimes included. Of the remainder, 16% said they were not included because there were no team meetings or discussions, 6% were not included, but these meetings and discussion did take place, and 5% said they were not part of a team. Relatively low numbers reported that they did not attend team meetings for varied reasons, Therefore, the difference between being regularly included (response = yes, always), and sometimes being included (response = yes, sometimes), was evaluated.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the participants' responses on the value of inclusion in team meetings in relation to their professional development. Those who were regularly included in team meetings and discussions were compared to those who were sometimes included, in terms of reported value to professional development. The relation between these variables was significant,  $X^2(1, N = 76) = 12.142, p = .0005, \phi = 0.40$ . There was a moderate association; those who were regularly included were significantly more likely to report that inclusion in team meetings and discussions had a high value for their professional development, than those who were only sometimes included. The same comparison was made with reference to performance, again using a chi-square test of independence. The relationship between these variables was also significant,  $X^2(1, N = 77) = 14.578, p = .0001, \phi = 0.44$ . Again, there was a moderate association; those who were regularly included were significantly more likely to report that inclusion in team meetings and discussions had a high impact on their performance in the role, than those who were only sometimes included.

## 5.3. Interview Themes

Ten interviews were completed, transcribed and themes identified. 70% of interviewees were under the age of 35. Thematic saturation was calculated (Guest et al., 2020), with a base of 2 and a run size of 2 (Table 1). The thematic saturation point was reached after four interviews, partly due to an in-depth first interview, and potentially due to the design of the interview questions being informed by survey findings. Because thematic saturation was reached quickly, interviews continued to ensure this saturation point was genuine, but no new themes were identified after six further interviews. 11 employee development themes were identified in the interview responses which are shown in the latter part of Table 1, assigned to each interviewee.

TABLE 1. CALCULATION OF THEMATIC SATURATION AND OVERVIEW OF INTERVIEW THEMES

Interviewee number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Employee development themes identified</b>	8	5	6	6	6	6	4	7	7	9
<b>New themes</b>	8	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>New themes in run</b>		8		3		0		0		0
<b>% change over base</b>		73%		27%		0%		0%		0%
Themes identified by interviewees	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Importance and role of network(s)			X		X	X		X	X	X
Importance and role of mentor(s)	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X
Learning through questions and workplace communication	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Learning through induction	X			X		X				X
Learning through demonstration and/or shadowing	X	X	X				X	X	X	X
Learning through informal training	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Learning through formal training	X		X	X	X	X			X	X
Feeling a sense of isolation or not belonging			X	X			X	X		X
Feeling a sense of belonging	X	X							X	X
Importance of holding relevant qualification(s)	X				X	X		X	X	X

Source: own compilation/calculations, based on Guest et al. (2020)

## 6. Discussion

The quantitative survey responses, statistical testing, and qualitative interview themes inform the discussion in this section. These results have been drawn together and interpreted in the context of existing literature.

### 6.1. Formal Employee Development

#### 6.1.1. Induction

Survey respondents typically perceived induction as low value. However, statistical testing showed respondents with inductions lasting two days or more were significantly more likely to report that induction had a high value for their professional development and high impact on role performance, than respondents with an induction period of one day or less. Given the potential for personalised induction to support both employee and organisation (Antonacopoulou & Güttel, 2010), and to show the organisational value placed on employee development (Martini & Cavenago, 2016; Noe et al., 2014), short inductions may therefore represent a missed opportunity.

Survey respondents with short inductions did not include many further comments. One respondent who had noted low impact and low value, with an induction of less than one day described their induction as “Here are chickens, here is feed. Give them a bag. If have eggs, collect, take to farm shop” (Survey respondent 98). In contrast, one respondent who noted high

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impact and high value described it as “A 4-day residential course to understand [...] goals and company ethos. Compared with others this was a ‘world class/industry leading’ experience” (Survey respondent 126). The potential gap between the experiences is clear. Variation in experience could feasibly be linked to limited understanding of induction’s purpose stemming from the previously recognised lack of managerial training (FDSC, 2019; Nye, Wilkinson & Lobley, 2023; Swadling, 2018). Unfortunately, the interviews added relatively little extra understanding here. Four interviewees specifically commented on induction, but with little further reflection on its purpose or impact. However, only two interviewees had inductions that exceeded the two day minimum that led to high value and impact. potentially explaining the lack of further reflection.

### 6.1.2. Formal training and education courses

Survey respondents had mixed views on training, with on the job training (typically informal) perceived as having a slightly higher impact on performance in the job, and off the job (typically formal) training perceived as having higher impact on professional development. This difference may relate to perceived transferability between employers, or movement capital (Martini & Cavenago, 2016). Overtly formalising informal learning can undermine the value of workplace learning (Felstead & Unwin, 2016); a value that survey respondents recognised, but only in relation to their performance, not their professional development.

Interviewees considered the formality and informality of training, rather than the setting. Seven mentioned the value of formal training and learning, when relevant and genuinely developmental, supporting Defra’s call for better training both within roles and prior to employment (Defra, 2022). In some cases, the interviewee’s focus was on the requirement for specific qualifications to access the sector or a role i.e. “I just need that piece of paper to get my foot in the door” (Interviewee 5). The tone here illustrates that the value of a qualification could sometimes be perceived as the access it provided via movement capital (Martini & Cavenago, 2016), rather than the development and learning.

### 6.1.3. Performance review/appraisal

Performance reviews were considered to have low to medium impact by survey respondents and were criticised in survey comments as being focused on employer requirements and metrics not employee needs, i.e. “Basis of reward” (Survey respondent 30) and “It was mainly for my employer to see how the placement programme could be improved rather than how my performance was going” (Survey respondent 2). These comments support the call to separate administrative functions, such as pay, from developmental elements in appraisals (Adams et al., 2021; CIPD, 2016; Wietrak et al., 2021).

While performance reviews have the potential to contribute to employee motivation (Wietrak et al. 2021), the opposite was seen in many survey responses, with comments such as “Was used to point out failings and demotivating experience” (Survey respondent 75) and “Reviews sometimes had a negative [effect], I felt very under pressure all the time to perform” (Survey respondent 27). There may be a further connection here with limited managerial training (FDSC, 2019; Nye, Wilkinson & Lobley, 2023; Swadling, 2018); managers may not realise that performance reviews offer an opportunity for development and motivation. Despite open questions, interviewees did not expand on this topic.

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## 6.2. Informal Employee Development through Tasks and Experiences in the Role

As mentioned earlier, informal learning was perceived by survey respondents as having a slightly higher impact on performance in the job, than formal learning. One survey respondent explored this further, explaining that in their view, *“Formal training was not really worth the time put in. Company trainers were brought in for one day or less. Learning from managers on-farm over a period of time was much more useful”* (Survey respondent 21).

This subject was explored further in the interviews. Informal training and demonstrations were discussed by eight interviewees in total; seven interviewees specifically commented on shadowing others. The majority of interviewees perceived shadowing as being a valuable source of development, saying *“I found it good to shadow someone for a day or two”* (Interviewee 3) and *“There were two consultants there that sort of took me under their wing and I would follow them around quite a lot and see their clients”* (Interviewee 8). However, one interviewee noted that this occurred instead of, rather than as part of, wider support: *“They showed me what I needed to do and then the onus was on me”* (Interviewee 7). Here, the interviewee appears to feel under-supported and under-prepared. This reinforces the principle of ongoing, individualised consideration for positive outcomes (Johnson & Burden, 2003; Woodrow & Guest, 2020).

Eight interviewees discussed feeling able to ask questions about their work; a topic which led to rich reflection. This links to the concept of psychological safety, and its beneficial impact on employees and organisations (Plouffe et al., 2023; Wietrak et al., 2021), and also to the potential for managers to develop work arrangements that allow learning through discussion, consultation and feedback (Felstead & Unwin, 2016). One interviewee highlighted that questions are part of a trusting, psychologically safe workplace where development is supported (Plouffe et al., 2023); they felt it was vitally important for the employer to *“Make sure new entrants can ask questions and feel like they’re not going to be laughed at or judged”* (Interviewee 1). This resonated with the responses from other interviewees, further comments included *“Questions should be encouraged – I’ve always appreciated managers taking the time to explain something to me. Patience is important, and not laughing at questions”* (Interviewee 2).

## 6.3. Employee Development from Professional Relationships and Networks

### 6.3.1. Workplace communication

Statistical testing of the survey results showed that survey respondents who were regularly included in team meetings were significantly more likely to report that this inclusion had a high value for their professional development and performance in role, than those who were only sometimes included. Where survey respondents reported high value their comments included reflections on community, learning and inclusion, such as *“Day to day meetings on what was to be done on the day, I benefited just listening”* (Survey respondent 118) and *“Allowed me to feel more included and part of the team”* (Survey respondent 125).

Four interviewees focused on the importance of informal communication, and one drew out why communication is a key skill, *“To be a good person on farm, you just have to have the skills to communicate and listen and understand people and get along with them and a bit of knowledge about the industry. You can work on that, regardless of where you come from”* (Interviewee 4) Interviewees also reflected on how they learned about the sector and their role (e.g., *“we might sit around the kitchen table and have a little chat”* (Interviewee 1) or *“having a chat, while you’re*

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*scraping out the inside of the machines” (Interviewee 2)).* These positive reflections on very informal, inclusive and warm support link to the wider research showing that peer support, communication and social support networks lead to positive workplace impacts and learning, in a psychologically safe environment (Crowley & Overton, 2021; Felstead & Unwin, 2016; Kolstrup, 2012; Nielsen et al, 2017; Plouffe et al., 2023; Wietrak et al., 2021).

### 6.3.2. Buddies, coaches and mentors

In the survey, small numbers reported a buddy, coach and/or mentor but those who did praised their value and impact. Comments on buddies from survey respondents highlighted their role in making the individual feel supported and safe *“My role involved travelling between farms alone, having a buddy both made me feel safer and prevented feeling lonely” (Survey respondent 20).* Another survey respondent noted how their buddy had *“Very high impact on my time working as I had someone to talk to about issues and someone who I knew would be supporting me” (Survey respondent 2).*

There was limited further discussion around buddies or coaches in the interviews, but eight interviewees spoke specifically about mentoring. Their experiences were universally positive, and described enthusiastically, *“I really like the fact that I've got these people that are mentors. That's been so useful to me” (Interviewee 1)* and *“He must have had a lot of influence on me because I still I still rely on his advice now and he's 80!” (Interviewee 8).* The mentor's role was considered in terms of offering another perspective, as well as support, with one interviewee noting *“They will see things that I don't necessarily see” (Interviewee 10).*

Multiple interviewees perceived the establishment of mentoring as an organisational or managerial duty, either by the manager themselves being the mentor *“...if a manager is in a position to be that kind of mentor-type person, that's definitely very helpful” (Interviewee 1)* or suggesting that the manager should *“put them with a mentor” (Interviewee 2).* However, other interviewees spoke about establishing mentoring relationships elsewhere, through mutual interests, meeting people at events etc. All were valuable, and praised by interviewees, as in their experience, mentors supported their wellbeing, inclusion, agricultural role and sector understanding, and job performance. Research has suggested that mentor presence may be more influential than the specific activity or level of engagement (Allen et al, 2004); the variety of mentoring experiences shared by the interviewees suggested that mentoring is very individual, driven by the mentor and the mentee themselves, and their relationship.

### 6.3.3. Networks

There was limited consideration of networks in survey comments. When present, it was typically in relation to challenges in building a network (e.g., *“It has taken time to build a network in the industry and local area, partly due to covid and partly due to not knowing what networks there are in the industry” (Survey respondent 112).*

Six interviewees considered their wider networks in agriculture or agri-food. One interviewee said, *“I think you tend to form quite strong relationships with people because you're all working towards similar collective goals” (Interviewee 10),* articulating the positive environment and connections facilitated by social support in the workplace (Nielsen et al, 2017). However, interviewees highlighted that networks can also be necessary for career advancement, with the importance of word of mouth and connections from agricultural universities specifically

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mentioned, and the resulting difficulties for those without such networks noted, consistent with Sutherland and Calo (2020). Whilst interviewees had overcome barriers to gain initial entry into agriculture and agri-food, potential barriers to subsequent progression persisted.

This area overlapped with thoughts around belonging, or a lack of belonging, which were common amongst interviewees. One interviewee expressed their belief that *“Farming can be a very closed-off industry”* (Interviewee 7) and another found the homogeneity of agriculture was exclusionary for them *“It’s a very strong community of people that know the same thing, do the same thing. And I just straightaway felt like I didn’t fit into that”* (Interviewee 4). Personal characteristics were also relevant to sense of belonging. One gay interviewee described themselves as *“holding myself back a little bit”* (Interviewee 10) in workplace conversations, feeling they might not fit into what they perceived to be a very traditional non-diverse environment, in line with Leslie et al. (2019). However, the same interviewee could also see how common interests and goals created community, which did make them feel supported *“So we’re always talking about the weather, how the seasons gone, how farmers are feeling, what the yields are like, and there’s a lot of like emotional investment in the outcomes of the work that we’re doing. So, I think you tend to form quite strong relationships with people because you’re all working towards similar collective goals”* (Interviewee 10). Another interviewee described those that they had met across agriculture and agrifood as *“the warmest people on the planet”* (Interviewee 9). Where belonging developed, interviewees stayed with employers and organisations in keeping with Blau et al. (2023).

## 7. Conclusions and recommendations

New entrants to UK agricultural and agri-food employment from non-agricultural backgrounds had mixed perceptions on the employee development experienced in their first role in the sector. This is perhaps to be expected in a diverse group where employment context will potentially vary significantly by subsector, or organisation size and type. However, some common experiences which had value to the individual and their professional development, and an impact on their performance in their role, were identified through this work. These have the potential to positively influence employee development policy and practice across agriculture and agri-food, and to underpin future research on this topic.

Survey respondents and interviewees highly valued informal employee development and workplace learning. Existing research has showed that informal learning need not be formalised to be of significant value, and participants’ responses and reflections demonstrated this to be the case in this context. Psychological safety is a long-established principle in workplace and employer best practice, and this research demonstrated that when managers recognise and welcome questions alongside formal and informal development, it can be instrumental in helping new entrants to develop and establish themselves. Interviewee’s reflections on belonging were also poignant; they wanted to not just work in agriculture and agri-food but to belong there. This finding has the potential to influence agricultural and agri-food employment practices for the better.

Participants overwhelmingly benefited from employee development via professional relationships and networks. Informal communication was valued, whether in team meetings and discussion, or when chatting with colleagues. Regular inclusion in team meetings and discussions created high value for professional development, and high impact on performance in role. In particular, mentors supported new entrant wellbeing and inclusion, development of role and sector understanding, and

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ultimately, job performance. This research found mentoring to be highly valued by new entrants to agriculture and agri-food. Managers can support this through identifying possible mentors for career and personal development. This is an important step forward, but further research into the nature and scope of mentoring in agricultural contexts is recommended.

The research highlighted that in terms of formal employee development, the purpose and potential of both induction and performance review are poorly understood and utilised. Although formal development activities were less common, and had less impact than informal, they were still perceived as being of medium or high value and impact by most participants. Interviewees also reflected on formal training or education leading to qualifications that ‘proved’ their interest and commitment. Content and timing of formal development activities affected impact; inductions of more than one day are a potential area for focus for supporting the development of new entrants to agri-food. This is an important discovery that warrants further testing and can be used to shape workplace practice.

Ultimately, new entrants to agriculture and agri-food benefitted when their employee development was designed to fit and support them in developing human capital that benefits the individual and their organisation. It is important to recognise that the needs of those from non-agricultural backgrounds might differ from the needs of those with an agricultural background, but potentially also differ from the needs of other new entrants. Given recognised shortfalls in managerial development across agriculture and agri-food, it may be that supporting managers with their own skillset and knowledge around employee development, could help to create workplaces where new entrants can be individually supported to learn, engage and develop. Approaches and effectiveness of managerial development in agriculture and agri-food is suggested as a key area for future research.

As noted earlier in this paper, future research should also focus on the many diverse employment contexts that exist within the agricultural sector, to support targeted future recommendations and a deeper understanding of how organisational and contextual characteristics influence new entrant development and support. It may be possible to draw from research into other traditional or family-dominated sectors i.e. hospitality, to explore whether agriculture and agrifood's challenges in attracting and developing new entrants are sector-specific or part of broader workforce development patterns. If the latter, evidence-based effective practice from other sectors may be of value in agricultural and agri-food contexts; its potential should be investigated.

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## **Declaration Statements**

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author reports no conflict of interest.

### **Funding**

The author received financial support from the Farmers Club Charitable Trust for this research.

### **Data Availability**

The original project report and data are available from The Farmers Club Charitable Trust at <https://tfcct.co.uk/read-our-fcct-reports> This journal article provides a concise and focused summary of certain elements of the original research and initial project outputs.

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