

ECO-JOB QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS - UNITED KINGDOM

Introduction

The eco-job-ap questionnaire was an integral part of the training needs analysis carried out for the Leonardo da Vinci Project. The aim was to identify the main issues relevant to eco-producers within the UK that should be addressed through the training programme.

Methodology

In total, 23 ecojob questionnaires were completed for the United Kingdom – 9 eco-expert, 10 eco-farmer, 2 enterprise manager and 2 farm workers. The survey was completed through a combination of farm visits or via a telephone interview. This provided the opportunity to explain and clarify questions and also to collect additional information over and above that contained in the structured questionnaire by way of background information.

The sample size was limited by budget and time constraints and, hence the findings are therefore not of a scale that could be considered to be fully representative of the eco-farming sector across the UK. However, it does provide an indicative picture of training need that can be further refined with time.

Results

The findings of the survey are summarised in the range of tables and charts for each category within the study under the categories of :

1. Eco-farmer
2. Eco-expert
3. Enterprise Manager
4. Farm worker

The majority of the farms within the study were owner occupied and a range of farm sizes were included, distributed throughout the UK. A number of common themes were evident from the results and the two main categories are outlined below.

Eco-farmer

70% of the interviewees in this category were owner occupiers with 60% of the sample being part time. 40% were fully organic with a further 30% being in transition to a fully organic system and 20% involved in integrated production. As such, the majority of the farmers were familiar with organic standards to some degree and approximately 50% indicated that they found it easy to implement the organic standards within their business. Beef and/or sheep were the most common enterprises.

The majority of the farmers interviewed within this group (90%) had a computer on the farm, all having an internet connection they could access. Of those with computers, 60% felt comfortable or very comfortable using ICT and, 70% felt comfortable using the internet. Most had used at least one software programme.

When asked if they felt training was important to their business, 80% responded positively with 70% stating that they had very little time to attend training. None of the farmers interviewed had completed a distance learning or internet based course, although 60% responded that they might be interested in such training if available.

The 5 most important topics for training perceived by interviewees within the next 5 years were identified as:

- Business Planning (70%)
- Compliance with organic standards (60%)
- Identifying and compliance with funding sources including EU schemes (60%)
- Satisfying environmental obligations (50%)
- Setting up channels of distribution – marketing (40%)

Eco-expert

The eco-experts interviewed during the survey were predominantly in extension advisory or education related roles within the UK. They were characterised, by a relatively high base level of qualification, with 7 of the 9 interviewees holding University degrees. A significant number also had some role in managing a production unit, which in 66.7% of cases was fully organic with a further 11.1% in

transition. The majority were familiar with organic standards, although only 44.4% found them easy to implement within the business.

89% of those interviewed had access to the internet and felt confident in using computers in general and, the internet in particular. Two thirds of the respondents in this group considered training as important for their business, however all indicated that it was extremely difficult to find the time to attend courses. Only 1 of the 9 respondents had completed an internet based e-learning course, although 55.56% indicated that they might be interested in such a course if it was relevant to their business needs.

The 5 most important topics of training in the next 5 years within this group were identified as:

- Applying appropriate specialist and professional expertise to practical situations (33.3%)
- Design and delivery of training and education programmes (33.3%)
- Supporting people through the training/development programme (33.3%)
- Monitoring and evaluating progress (33.3%)
- Identifying business development/change needed (22.22%)

Additional points raised during discussions

The attraction of internet based learning for the majority of those interviewed centred on increasing flexibility in terms of time and place of study. Most respondents indicated during discussions that, they would if possible, like units to be stand alone so that study could be completed at a time that suited the farming cycle. Bite sized learning modules of 1-1.5 hours were preferred as most of the interviewees had outdoor lifestyles and were not used to long periods of study, particularly computer based.

The need to keep units short, simple and practical was also reinforced by respondents during discussions. The objective was not the acquisition of knowledge, but rather to acquire the practical skills needed to develop their business further.

The decision to switch from conventional to organic production is complex and dependent on a series of interrelated business factors. Feedback from the survey suggested that potential converters in particular would appreciate a blended learning approach with business and technical mentoring support.

Potential converters were generally keen to work as part of a group in the early stages of conversion and indicated that they would find it particularly valuable learning from the experiences of others and, perhaps having the opportunity to visit existing units and participate in group based study tours. As such, experience within NI has led to the incorporation of the following activities within organic training courses available to farmers:

- Half and full-day seminars and Advisory events
- Half and full day farm walks, workshops
- Development Group meetings (group of approx 12 farmers)
- “Walk the Supply Chain” days - marketing
- Study visits and tour

Feedback during the study also indicates that the following principles are important to all considering a switch to organic production:

- Implications of change in practices relating to certification body needs and requirements
- The pathways through organic conversion
- Changes in farming practices required to gain organic certification
- Implications of conversion for the business
- Market outlets and potential for organic produce

Existing eco-producers were mainly interested in issues related to the expansion or development of their business such as marketing, finance, environment and sources of grant aid.

Conclusion

The survey provides an indication of training needs in relation to the eco-farming sector within the UK. It highlights the potential for an e-learning or blended learning approach

to address the training and development needs of the target groups and, reinforces the necessity to ensure that course content and module design are directly relevant to the needs of the business, and are sufficiently flexible and practical to maximise impact and encourage participation.