

CANADIAN CONNECTION

TWO FARMING MATES FROM CANADA AND AUSTRALIA HAVE SET UP A BUSINESS THAT'S LINKING AGRICULTURAL WORKERS WITH EMPLOYERS ACROSS THE GLOBE.

STORY + PHOTOS **FREDA NICHOLLS**



Stuart Austin (left) and his Canadian mate Craig Ference have started a successful business that straddles both their homelands.

A CANADIAN and an Australian who both have a love of farming and travel have put their expertise together to create an agricultural-recruitment business in both countries. Cascade Recruitment (the Canadian side) and Positive Perfection (based in Albury, NSW) have become popular with young farmers wanting to work and travel in another country, and are also helping alleviate labour shortages on both sides of the globe.

Craig Ference, 28, from Kirriemuir in the Canadian province of Alberta, and his mate Stuart Austin, 27, both grew up on farms and have worked in each other's countries. They felt they could improve on what they had experienced, from both the employer and employee perspective.

Craig first had the opportunity to work in Australia at the age of 18, straight out of school. He travelled to Moree, NSW, to work on an 84-year-old fellow Canadian's 8000-hectare property for a year and found many similarities between the two countries. "I would have worked for nothing; the experience I gained was huge," Craig says. "The equipment is often the same, the types of crops grown are the same and it's a similar language, but it's the seasons and the weather that are different."

Being at high latitude in the Northern Hemisphere, Alberta has a shorter growing season than in Australia and moisture requirements for crops and pasture are obtained primarily from snow melts rather than rainfall. Even so, Craig says there are a lot of farming practices his home district has in common with southern New South Wales where Stuart grew up.

Born in western Victoria, Stuart and his family moved to Albury and then onto his grandparents' property at nearby Burrumbuttock where they run sheep and cattle and breed working Kelpies. After finishing high school Stuart headed to the Northern Territory and was running station camps at the age of 19 before heading to Queensland and working on large cattle feedlots before travelling to Canada at the age of 24.

Stuart became involved with the Young Farmers Summit of the Americas and Canadian Young Farmers board and this is where he met Craig. The two like-minded farmers hit it off immediately and realised that they both had had similar experiences and that there was huge demand for young experienced agricultural workers in both their countries, especially at peak periods such as harvest, sowing and calving. "In Canada the agricultural industry loses a lot of young employees to work in the oil fields," Craig says. "And here we have the mines," Stuart says.

In their first year in business, Stuart and Craig placed 25 Australian workers in Canada and 10 Canadians in Australia. By providing good workers and mostly through word of mouth, they have created a loyal group of employers in both countries looking for more. Their clients are the employers, who pay a fee for each worker. "We look for young people, smart go-getters with experience, and we can't get enough of them," Stuart says. "We could place a good worker three times."

Using their website, Stuart and Craig initially ask both employees and employers to fill out an expression of interest form, answering questions about their experience or requirements, with contact numbers for follow-ups. References and resumes from employees are then matched with different jobs in similar regions.

"We are very strict with screening both employer and employee as it's our reputation on the line," Craig says. "How people fill out the forms can tell us a lot about them," Stuart says. "The process tends to be a bit self-screening as

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far as potential employees go. If the [potential employee] is lazy or not enthused, they are not going to get on a plane for the other side of the world; right away you are getting top-notch people.”

“It’s like a marriage,” Craig says. “We have to match employer and employee personalities – our success comes from that. We can relate to the people we work with, both employees and employers, as we’ve been both.”

With similar immigration and employment procedures and rates of pay in each country, the opportunity to employ experienced, dedicated workers is attractive to both countries. Stuart and Craig take time to visit as many of their clients as possible. Here, they pile into Stuart’s white Ford ute armed with their Blackberries and laptop to take on the dusty back roads, from northern Victoria to outback Queensland, talking with employers about their experiences and expectations with the workers who have been placed with them.

One of their clients is brothers Sam and Nick Armytage, who have 3035ha of dryland and irrigated cropping land at Conargo and Boree Creek in the Riverina and employed two Canadian workers over the summer harvest season. “Any workers that are any good have full-time work around here,” Sam says. “This was the next best way to get experienced blokes for a short time.”

Last harvest one of the Canadians, 19-year-old Tyler Spratt was called back to the family farm in Canada after only six weeks but 22-year-old Greg Loewen stayed on for five months, travelling around Australia in between jobs. “They were excellent workers,” Sam says. “They couldn’t believe how similar everything was – they just stepped right in and did things that needed doing. They put in long hours to finish jobs if it was needed; they loved it.”

Accommodation is provided for all employees whether in Australia or Canada, with some employers also providing a car or phone if needed or negotiated beforehand. “The boys stayed at Nick’s house and we offered them an old Falcon to drive,” Sam says. “Greg came with us when we travelled up to Emerald and went fishing at Yeppoon. He couldn’t have been more grateful; he really wanted to have a look around at everything. He came to

our kids’ birthday parties, had Christmas with us; I wish we could get him back each year.”

With a 12-month Australian working holiday visa, the employees are able to work for six months with one employer, but if they work for three months in a designated rural or remote area, they are able to extend the visa by another year. This visa is available for 18- to 30-year-olds only. For Australians wanting to work in Canada, they must apply for a working-holiday visa, which is valid for 24 months, be aged between 18 and 30, hold a valid Australian passport, not be accompanied by dependents and have proof of \$4000 in funds. Unlike the Australian visa, there is no limit to how long you can be with one employer.

Sam and Nick are now looking to employ two Canadians for sowing and then again for harvest. “Ideally we’d like them for two to three months at a time,” Sam says. “It’s great that they are so flexible.”

Craig and Stuart also place agricultural-science graduates specialising in agronomy in both Canada and Australia, and are looking to branch out into agricultural tourism for farmers in both countries. Utilising their experience and networks created through different farming bodies and people they meet, the men have a rural-recruitment business that fits neatly into the demand created by other industries, as well as providing a popular working alternative for young farmers. Listening to these two dynamic young men working their laptops and talking on their mobile phones with their two quite distinct accents, communicating with ease not only between states but countries, it really does seem a small world.

WORKING IN CANADA

If you’re interested in agricultural work in Canada, visit the Positive Perfection and Cascade Recruitment website at www.positive-perfection.com or contact Stuart Austin on (0428) 521 612. There are currently jobs on offer on grain and cattle farms in locations as diverse as Calgary, Winnipeg and south-eastern Saskatchewan.



Nathan Picton (left) and Trent Baker (right) on horseback and Scott Otto and Mandy Fisher on the ground treat a cow during calving at Roach and Sons Ranch, Alberta, Canada. All four Aussies found employment through Stuart and Craig.