FCC Knowledge Podcast

Season 4 – Episode 4

Ranch Academy: Erin McKnight's blueprint for farm employee training

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

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Interviewee: Erin McKnight (EM)

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AS: From AgExpert, it's the FCC Knowledge Podcast, a show that features real Canadians in agriculture, real stories and real good conversations about the business of farming. I'm your host Aimée Stang.

EM: I'm excited to see kids graduate from high school and want to go either back to the farm or explore how their interests and their skills can complement the ag industry.

AS: Human resources and training is always a challenge, especially on the farm, as farmers and ranchers take a more business-centered approach to their operations. Today we're talking with Saskatchewan rancher Erin McKnight about how she created training content for her family's ranch to provide a better employee onboarding experience.

Erin leaned on her farming and nursing background and her need to balance work off the farm with her family and ranch responsibilities to not only pursue her passion for ranching but also solve some major challenges in her business along the way. Starting with a handbook, Erin began developing videos, modules, and small assignments to train her own employees and give herself some peace of mind as an employer.

So welcome to the podcast, Erin. Would you like to tell us a little bit about yourself and your farm?

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EM: My husband and I ranch in the Sandhills of Saskatchewan. We live here with our two boys. They are 8 and 10, and we have a lot of family. My husband's family is in ranching. And they live around us, within maybe an hour away. If there's branding season, we're constantly at each other's houses. Same with weaning. And basically, if anyone needs a helping hand, we're there for them. But as far as the books go, we all run our own operations.

AS: What is your background? You said your family farms as well?

EM: I was born on a mixed farm and ranch in a tiny little town in Saskatchewan. After high school, I went off to university to pursue a nursing career, and for some reason I met a young man and I ended up back in Saskatchewan.

AS: So, you have some crop land?

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EM: Yes. The majority of our ranch is native and tame grass. And then we do have a few thousand acres of cultivated land that we either will seed into green feed or we rent out a few of the acres from time to time. So it is mostly native and tame grass and then we do a bunch of, like, haying and that sort of stuff. We don't do any of our own seeding at the moment. We hire that out. We run about 750 cow calf pairs, give or take, depending on the year and the climate and all the stuff, but 750 cow calf pairs is our baseline.

AS: And for those people who aren't familiar with the Sandhills region of Saskatchewan, that's pretty rough terrain.

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EM: It is very rough. Not all of the Sandhills are, but where we are specifically is very choppy and it's very rough and it's very hard to manage, or it takes some getting used to. We do a lot of it on horseback; it's just too rough for all-terrain vehicles. We can take them down a few trails to check water and whatnot, but when it comes to actually checking on cattle, it's on horse or my husband then does fly a small airplane to help basically eliminate the dead space. So he can go up and fly around for 20 minutes. He can see, first of all, that there's water in all the troughs and second of all, you know, that there are no cattle in this corner of the field.

AS: Mm-hm.

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EM: And that just eliminates the time we don't have to ride around looking for nothing. It is very handy.

AS: You're not a nurse anymore full-time?

EM: No.

AS: You shifted to ranching full-time.

EM: So, I finished nursing school and moved out to the ranch with my husband, and I had to drive an hour into work, work 12 hours and drive an hour home. We have one full-time hired person here at all times and then seasonally we'll have, like, maybe one or two extra part-time employees.

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EM: I would just get back in the groove of things at work and, like, maybe we would lose an employee. So then I would have to take some time off as I wasn't able to drop my kids off at daycare or anything when I went to work because I went through town at too early of an hour and too late. So it was up to my husband to do all of the

ranching stuff and either get our small kids to daycare and back, which was 20 minutes there and 20 minutes back, and also do all of the things. So I would take some time off and I would jump in and I would help and then we would get somebody new to work for us, and we would take some time to orientate them. And then I would go back to work, and then it would happen again.

(Laughter)

EM: I just wasn't able to fully be committed and have my head in my nursing career, so I just decided to be all in at the ranch.

AS: Was that a difficult decision for you?

EM: It is still a difficult decision. It was very hard, but in reality, I am very happy where I am and I love doing the work on the ranch. That's probably where my passion is.

AS: You were talking about the cycle of having an employee and then having the employee leave, and then recruiting somebody new and then having them leave. So obviously this was something that was a challenge for you on the farm.

EM: Every time I went back to nursing, I would just jump right back in, right? Like, I already had critical thinking down. I knew how to do that. And I had my base knowledge that I already knew from university and previous experiences, but anything that had changed while I was gone, a nursing department is very efficient.

AS: Right. You'd have to be.

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EM: And they have all these little checklists and, like, they have all the information you need right at your fingertips. So it's easy to look things up. But there's nothing like that in ranching, and so I would have to train all these people in every little aspect and trust that they were making medication dosages calculated properly. So I started to take the things that I had in my nursing unit and bring them to the farm. I started making little checklists and some videos and just a lot of little tutorials. Every time I would do something and teach someone something, then I would be, like, "Okay, now I need to go and write down what it is and how I did that," so that I don't have to necessarily think about it all the next time. I can show them where to find the information.

AS: That's a great idea. I mean, we interviewed an accountant on the podcast and he said when he started accounting, he was given an employee manual. And so we don't really think about doing that in farming and ranching.

So it's always primarily you that train the new employee every time?

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EM: I would do, like, the orientation process and then they head out to work primarily with my husband. I actually did create a handbook for our new staff, which is very nerdy of me.

(Laughter)

EM: But a while back, we actually had somebody report us to the Labour Board, which was very eye opening to me, because in nursing you write everything down. If it wasn't wrote *[sic]* down, it didn't happen. And so when the Labour Board called me and they wanted some records — and some of them I didn't have, and some of them I just didn't have recorded and collected properly. Like, I had to go back and find proof to defend myself. And in the end, I hadn't done anything wrong, but it still was a very long process for me to find all the information that I needed to prove that I had indeed paid this person properly and as we agreed to.

And it was actually, like, some text messages that probably saved my butt. So, then I was, like, “Oh my goodness, I need to write things down better.” So then I created a handbook that was, like, this is when you'll get paid, this is how you'll get paid, this is how you can give me your hours, all that sort of stuff. And when I hired someone, I would go through the handbook with them and we would initial each page together, so I knew that we were on the same page. And then I would have them sign a written contract that said how much they were going to work, where they were going to get paid, all that sort of stuff so that in the future, nobody can contest that. It was written down. I had it. It was covering my butt.

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AS: And your husband, Steve, when you started documenting these things and making videos and making a manual, was he on board with that? Or did he think, “Oh, is this overkill?”

EM: I think he was kind of, like, “I'm glad you're doing it. I don't want to.”

(Laughter)

EM: Yes, he probably maybe was, like, “Is this necessary?” But I mean, I do think that having the Labour Board call you and be, like, “Hey, where's this information?” was very eye-opening. And it was, like, okay, maybe we do need to do this. And I think he was just thankful that we learned to do it before it was actually a problem.

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AS: Yes, and there's nothing like someone external validating your choices. You said you've created a handbook and orientation for new staff, so clearly this is something that you've gotten really passionate about. It's clearly important because, I mean, there could be some confusion or there could be some serious impacts on your business if something gets miscommunicated or misinterpreted.

EM: Even if you only employ one person, you're still an employer, you're still a business. And as much as I rely on that person to show up to work, they are relying on me to be a good employer. Most times someone comes to work for you and we're doing these jobs, we're getting work done, we're doing that, but there is an entire relationship there of employee and employer that I would say gets set to the side sometimes. We just have so many tasks on the ranch that if I personally had to show every new hire how to do everything, it would take so much time that neither I nor my business has. And that's where I started to develop those videos and checklists, and then putting them into an app so that people that don't work for me can also utilize them, which is something I'm very excited about.

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AS: Has that impacted your relationship with your employee? Has it impacted the longevity or the retention so far since you've started this?

EM: I think it is empowering to them. They have that confidence in that they have a little bit of a pre-exposure to most things, so they don't need me there with them 24/7. So they don't necessarily feel like my right-hand man. They feel like they have more input and I think they feel more valued.

AS: More of a stake in the business?

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EM: Yes, also more comfortable. If somebody is constantly, “I don't know how to do this,” or, “I don't feel comfortable doing this,” they're not likely to stick around. And they can solve problems more easily because they have all this information at their fingertips. They’re out in the field and they come across something, they can call me. Whether both of us have cell service or not, that's questionable.

(Laughter)

EM: But they can bring it up on their phone and they can go, “Oh okay, this is what I can try.” And they just feel like they've done so much more than just report problems.

AS: There's a lot of confidence that gets built in self-autonomy like that and a lot of employee satisfaction, I would suspect.

EM: Yes.

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AS: Can you give us some examples of some of the videos that you’ve created?

EM: Yes, I lumped them together in modules. So there's an entire module on transportation and hauling, and how to strap a ton of cell blocks onto your flat deck properly, or why it's important to pen your animals up properly in a stock trailer. And then, like, checking the water for cows. You can go out and check water, but I want to actually know much more than if the water is just there. So it goes through all of the different things you can check while you're checking water. And also, if there is no water, what I need to know to fix that or what you can do to troubleshoot it while you're out there.

AS: That’s brilliant. And you had some videos on wildfires?

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EM: Yes, that is a big one out here. We live in the Sandhills. It's a very large — probably 100,000 acres plus of just native grassland. Not all of that is mine.

(Laughter)

EM: That's just the (inaudible).

AS: Yes, let's specify that, right?

EM: Yes. But when a wildfire happens, what do you do? It's not the same as it would be, you know, in a shop in town at your welding shop. It’s not a fire extinguisher situation. So how to find your location on your phone, how to share it with somebody, who and what to call and then, like, how to stay safe and how to watch from a distance and just what to do when a wildfire — when you come across one. We used to not leave the ranch because we are too afraid to be gone in certain dry seasons and we still don't go very far. But if a lightning strike happens, I'm not terrified that my hired people are going to be hurt. They know how to stay safe.

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AS: That’s huge, even for your peace of mind.

EM: Safety is a huge piece of it. I don't want anyone to get hurt ever. And there's no safety training out there that will prepare you for all of the pieces of farm and ranching. Like, there's just so many different things.

AS: You’ve created videos for branding as well?

EM: Yes, and this one especially is fun. My kids help by brandings. Sometimes, like, the hired person's kids might come, or we have people that are visiting from different countries, and they can go through and have access to this little course. And that way they just know everything that's going on and how to, like, have some awareness in the branding pen. They know how to, like, safely put sharps away, how to fill medication syringes and just — they have, like, a little bit of a pre-expectation of what's going to happen, which definitely keeps people safe for one thing, but also it gets them excited to get in there and get their hands dirty.

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AS: Branding is such a social activity. That's such a great thing that you have that preparation for people participating. Were you surprised? Did you expect to have this level of a requirement to manage your human resources when you decided to go back to the farm full time?

EM: No, not at all. It is interesting to me how farms and ranches have evolved, whether that's, like, all the policy that's in place and all the different paperwork and the accounting and all that stuff and the human resources. 20 years ago you probably paid someone cash and they showed up to work and that was it.

(Laughter)

EM: And now there's payroll and there's records of employment and all of the things. And I had no idea about any of it.

AS: So, you learned on the fly as well?

EM: I did. I learned a lot of it on the fly and a lot of it by being, like, “Oh, I should have done that already.”

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AS: What is the role of clear communication and setting expectations with your team?

EM: There's a couple of things here. When I went to university for my Bachelors *[sic]* of Nursing, the entire first year of school was communication, and I was less than impressed. I was confused. I signed up for nursing. Like, what is this? But it wasn't long after I started nursing that I actually realized that it might be the most important piece. Being able to clearly communicate among your team is so important. Being able to communicate expectations and your clear roles during the day, it helps everyone feel sure of themselves, confident in their role, and it helps everyone understand why their role is important and why they have to do that job that way, because everyone else's job is working in unison. It's not always about time and efficiency. Safety is the major consideration. We kind of forget about it because if everyone's safe, we're not thinking about it. But there's just so many spots that it could go wrong. I read this somewhere once, that, “Unspoken expectations are premeditated resentments.”

(Laughter)

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AS: That's a very good quote.

EM: And I loved it because, you know …

AS: Yes.

EM: It is, because if you're not telling somebody, you know, “This is the job I want you to do to this extent,” if you're telling them part of the job or part of the piece and they don't do it properly, you're going to be upset because it didn't go as you expected it to. But really, it's up to you as the employer to give them the full expectation.

AS: So, do you think that these expectations that you're setting and this communication that you're establishing with your employee is helping them see their role as more of a career than a job?

EM: I think so. If you excel in your job on a farm or a ranch, there are ways to move up. And getting the job done is one thing, but understanding it and being able to communicate properly is probably one of the best ways to be able to move up in any job.

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AS: You can apply that to, yes, any job. Like you said, right.

EM: If you can do the job, that's good. But if you can communicate about what's happening and why, you're going to go somewhere. But if you're just nose to the grind, doing your job and not talking to anyone, you're …

AS: You could stay stagnant.

EM: Yes, exactly.

AS: So, you've taken these learnings and your videos and the resources and the tools, and other businesses and employees in ranching can take advantage of what you've done?

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EM: I didn't develop an app myself. I developed the videos and all of the content and I put it on a platform for others to be able to access. It's very exciting for me in terms of employees and future employees and people who don't have a farming or ranching background but are very curious and want to do a stint on a farm or a ranch. Often if you don't have experience, you're turned away. But at least this way maybe somebody will take a chance on you or something because you've had some exposure. Maybe you're mechanically inclined.

But again, no farm or ranch experience as farm and ranch kids are getting to be few and far. It's not like we all have that grandparent connection to a farm or ranch anymore. My hope is that anybody can access this app and feel a little more connected and they could jump in and get their hands dirty, whether that's volunteering or getting a job. Or maybe you're new to the farm or ranch. Maybe you just moved on to one with a partner, but you're a little shy and not too sure how to get involved. Might just be that little bit of confidence that you need to get in there.

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AS: Have you hired people with no ranching experience before?

EM: Yes, I've hired people with no ranching experience. When I hire anybody, we always just take into account, like, what is their skill set and utilize that, give them the jobs that they're good at, and then they slowly get a taste for all the rest and they get better at things as they grow. I'm not going to hire somebody who has no ranching experience and put them on a horse and say, "Go check the cows."

(Laughter)

EM: In this case, like, we hired somebody who has very little ranching experience. Well, he's been a welder before. Okay, so I'm going to use your welding experience and your mechanicallyinclined brain. And then we're going to go together and learn about the cattle side of things.

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AS: You're totally right. Labour is such an issue in agriculture. And there are people that are interested, and it's just, where to start? And how do you build that confidence as an employer too, that you're going to be finding someone that can integrate themselves into your business, can learn the things that they need to learn and be an asset to your business? Because if it's taking you longer, or if you have to do the work yourself, or it's taking you the time to invest in them or to show them how to do things, or just to assume, like you said, it's probably not worth the investment of time.

EM: Absolutely. Managing people and tasks is a huge job in itself and a common mindset in our industry is probably, "If I have to babysit them I might as well do it myself." And I strongly believe that it doesn't have to be that way.

(Laughter)

AS: This app, have you had people starting to use it outside of your farm?

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EM: Mostly at this time, I've had people within our organization and some, like, family and close friends that I've had go through it just to give me some feedback before I really throw it out there into the world.

AS: What was the feedback been like so far with your testers?

EM: It's been really good. Some of the stuff in there is things you wouldn't think about it until you were face to face with it. There's a bunch of, like, flow charts within it that if this happens, look here. If that happens, look there. And, like, there's homework with every section as well. It's, like, find out who your power company is and the phone number that you would call if the power is out. Put that in your phone, right? It's not big homework, but it's just finding those pieces that only apply to you and saving them in your information.

00:19:34

AS: What excites you the most about the future of agriculture?

EM: It's just so exciting. It is the place to be, I think. We are all here to stay. There's no other industry that I feel is as sure as agriculture. Everybody needs to eat and everybody always will. We were all told as kids, or at least my generation was, to go and get a degree and that agriculture was maybe not a good life. Urbanization was being pushed, and I'm so excited to see people get more curious and involved with where their food comes from and just come back to agriculture. There is, like, so much technology and there's cool research happening. I'm excited to see kids graduate from high school and want to go either back to the farm or explore how their interests and their skills can complement the ag industry.

AS: Yes, because we need so many different skill sets to grow this industry.

EM: So many.

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AS: It's very apparent that you've taken a lot of the skills that you've learned in your nursing career and education and applied them back to your own business, which is amazing to see.

EM: You could take anything in university and end up anywhere further down the road.

AS: What do those of us in agriculture need to keep in mind as we work with others in the industry?

EM: I encourage everyone just to build a strong team, not just within your operation, but also with your industry partners. You know, you train your employees well, but you have to extend that same level of clarity and guidance to your partners, clearly communicating about what you need, whether that's telling your parts guy that you want the most affordable option or explaining that you need the highest quality

because you can't afford a return trip. You're constantly just showing people how to work with you, taking time to talk with them, build relationships. You're constantly training and communicating throughout your whole life. The other side, when it comes to what do we need to keep in mind as we work with others in agriculture, is transparency. I will die on the hill of transparency.

(Laughter)

I cannot emphasize enough how important it is for us all to tell the truth. As a nurse, if I reported my patients' vital signs or output incorrectly, the physician's going to prescribe something wrong, medication or treatment wise. And the same goes for farming and ranching. If we inflate the truth to, like, protect our egos per se, you know, telling our neighbors how amazing our crop was or claiming we had a perfect breed up, we're never going to learn from each other and in fact we'll probably end up skewing the entire industry. Transparency is, like, to me the backbone of progress and without honesty, we risk making so many flawed decisions. Transparency is, like, the only way we can grow and improve and support each other, even if it's uncomfortable at times.

00:22:11

AS: This was a great discussion with Erin about her approach to hands on ranch employee training. While at first glance it might appear like an out-of-the-box approach, Erin was simply borrowing ideas from her previous experiences and field of work to solve very real issues in agriculture: human resource management. We've said it before on this podcast that no education is wasted, and Erin sure proved that point by leveraging her nursing background to foster clear communications, create an environment where safety is a priority, and turn the ranch employee role into a career choice rather than just a job. With labour being a consistent challenge in the ag industry, an investment in her human resource strategy is an investment in the efficiency of her business.

Check the show notes for further reading and resources related to this episode. Did you enjoy this episode? Be sure to share it with your family and friends. Please do subscribe so you can be the first to know when we drop new episodes. And if you have feedback or topic ideas you'd like to share, go ahead and leave us a review. Your feedback will help us make decisions on what's valuable to you as a listener.

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