

Employment In The Meat Sector

A MAJOR SOURCE OF RURAL JOBS



The meat sector provides direct employment to 16,000 people and has a major positive impact on the regional economy and rural economic activity



There is a multiplier effect whereby every job in a meat processing facility helps contribute to the sustainability of over 2 additional jobs



There are a wide range of roles and opportunities in the sector. These range from production roles to opportunities in logistics, sales, finance, HR, IT, engineering, etc.



In recent years, the sector has faced a serious challenge in recruiting enough staff to maintain current production levels and achieve the industry's growth plans



To address labour shortages meat processors have welcomed the important contribution made by staff from outside the EU



Whilst the majority of workers in the industry are from Ireland or Europe, c.20% of the workforce is drawn from outside of Europe



Without the requisite labour availability, ambitious growth targets and new market development work will be hindered



Significant training and career progression opportunities exist across the meat processing sector

Overview

The meat sector has a major positive impact on rural economic activity and the provision of jobs and livelihoods in rural areas. There is a multiplier effect whereby every job in a meat processing facility helps contribute to the sustainability of over 2 additional jobs

Job opportunities in the sector range from production roles such as meat processor operatives, skilled knifemen, supervisors, technical & quality roles to other opportunities in logistics, sales, finance, Health & Safety, HR, engineering and I.T. Within production, many staff progress from their starting position to supervisory or management opportunities over time.

Over recent years, the meat processing industry has faced a serious challenge in terms of securing the necessary staff, and to address labour shortages meat processors have welcomed the skills contributed by staff from outside the EU, under the Government's Employment Permit system.

Meat industry supports a range of associated sectors

Multiplier effect of jobs supported by the industry

Meat Industry creates 16,000 direct jobs and additional jobs in:

- Haulage
- Refrigeration
- Packaging
- Materials suppliers
- Veterinary services
- Laboratories
- Accommodation
- Catering/food

Labour shortage in the sector

Strong economic growth in Ireland, over recent years reduced the rate of unemployment below 5%. This made recruitment of staff into many industries – including meat processing – extremely difficult. While the impact of Covid-19 will undoubtedly affect unemployment levels in the short-term, as the economy recovers, it is expected that labour shortages will again materialise.

MII’s members will always, in the first instance, look to source staff locally, and will broaden to a national search if that isn’t possible. Processors work very closely with Government Departments to recruit staff from the live register. If this fails then extensive efforts will be made to recruit staff with the appropriate skills from across the European Union.

In recent years, the reality has been that the meat processing industry, like many other sectors of the economy, would not be able to function without supplementing the labour supply with staff from outside the EU coming to Ireland under the Employment Permit scheme.

Employment Permit Scheme

In recent years, over 3,000 permits have been granted to allow staff from outside the EU to work in Irish meat processing facilities.

Employment Permits entitle staff the right to employment in Ireland for up to two years, with the possibility to renew these permits thereafter.

Permit holders are covered by the same Irish employment legislation and protections as all staff. In addition, the rules of the permit scheme also stipulate:

- **That workers who come to Ireland have full employment rights**
- **Minimum salary thresholds, above the minimum wage, for example the Meat Processor Operative minimum salary is €22,000 while Skilled Knifemen/ Boners receive a minimum of €27,500 per annum**
- **Employers are obliged to ensure accommodation is sourced and English language training is made available to permit holders**
- **Employers are required to undertake extensive advertising of jobs nationally and in the EU before access to the permit regime is allowed**

Growth opportunities

Without the requisite labour availability, the Irish economy may not be able to take advantage of new market opportunities and the diversification of export markets for Irish meat, that has grown in importance due to the challenges faced managing the new trading relations between the UK and EU post-Brexit.

Training and development

Training and development form a key part of the retention policies across companies with employees being given the opportunity to progress into supervisory and management roles within the organisation. In many facilities, over 50% of the front-line management, engaged in Production, Quality or Technical roles, were appointed from the factory floor. All staff have the opportunity to train and upskill and progress in terms of role and associated remuneration. Bursaries are also given to individuals to pursue external qualifications.

Dispelling myths

Pay: This is not a sector that is based on low pay, and the wage distribution is consistent with levels in the wider food processing sector. While the starting salaries for some general operative positions may be at minimum wage level, staff have the opportunity to quickly progress their career, transfer into a wide range of other roles, and increase their earnings. The Irish national minimum wage is amongst the highest in Europe.

Living arrangements: In common with other sectors of the economy, the provision of accommodation is not, nor ever was, part of general employment arrangements in the industry. However, as part of the Employment Permit Scheme, processors are required to assist in the sourcing of accommodation for workers. It is not mandatory that these employees avail of the accommodation arranged by employers and most, in time, elect to find their own accommodation.

Worker nationality: The vast majority, some 80%, of meat industry employees are of Irish and EU/EEA origin. Irish staff continue to represent the single largest nationality.

