

## **“Learning How to Let People Do Things is Very Hard”: A Collective Case Study of Employee Training in Small Meat Processing Plants**

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### **Introduction**

Meat processing plants account for nearly 10% of the 1.2 million small business jobs in Missouri (United States Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy, 2022; Missouri Agricultural and Small Business Development Authority, 2021). In addition to contributing to small business employment, the meat processing industry contributes \$5.9 billion dollars to Missouri’s economy (Missouri Agricultural and Small Business Development Authority, 2021). However, Missouri meat processing plants face serious labor issues (Syukron & Su, 2022). In 2022, only 61.54 % of Missouri meat processing plants operated at full capacity (Syukron & Su, 2022).

Meat processing facilities require labor in various facets including slaughter, fabrication, and customer service roles. The unpleasant and potentially dangerous working conditions in processing plants (e.g., knives, saws, blades, cold temperatures, etc.), make it difficult to attract and retain employees (Syukron & Su, 2022). Additionally, the rurality of many processing plants puts them in direct competition with other industries in these communities, creating yet another obstacle to finding qualified labor (Syukron & Su, 2022; White & Rahe, 2020). Employees can be a valuable company asset; an employee can make or break a company’s reputation or adversely affect the company’s profit (Elnaga & Imran 2013).

Employees are typically responsible for the necessary work and ensure customer satisfaction when it comes to product quality. However, if employees are not properly trained and equipped with the information needed to do these tasks, they may be unable to accomplish them at their maximum potential (Elnaga & Imran 2013). Although an advanced degree is not always required, meat processing work does require significant on-site training (Syukron & Su, 2022). Proper training and development of employees helps to reduce absenteeism, and increases the commitment and satisfaction of the employees (Anis et al. 2010).

This research was informed by previous literature. The research team chose to conduct this inquiry without a predetermined theoretical framework. Our research team was concerned that locking ourselves into a theoretical frame at the beginning of the study might limit critical issues from emerging. This approach aligns with Stake’s approach to case study design, where the focus is on the case itself (Mott & Haddad, 2025). This case study aimed to better understand how Missouri meat processing plants onboard and train employees and describe barriers that keep this from occurring. Gaining additional insight on this phenomenon may be useful in the development of resources and training programming for meat processing plants.

## Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this collective case study is to describe the onboarding and training processes of employees in small Missouri meat processing plants. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do owner-operators train employees in small meat processing plants in the state of Missouri?
2. What are the roadblocks to employee training in small meat processing plants in the state of Missouri?

## Methods

This qualitative research used a collective case study design (Stake, 1995) to describe onboarding and training processes in small meat processing plants. The bounded system for this case study was 6 small family-owned meat processing plants in Missouri. Plants had between 5 and 55 employees, including family members. The owner-operators of these plants were all middle-aged individuals, and four of the six plants were co-owned and operated by husband-wife teams. Two plants were operated by individuals who left a prior career, and four were multi-generational family businesses. Participants were purposefully selected from the Missouri Association of Meat Processors membership list. We considered the number of years in business as well as operation size to ensure maximum variation in the sample in making decisions about participants. It is important that we acknowledge our own previous experiences, as they influence research design, findings, and implications. This manuscript's lead researcher is a graduate student in agricultural education who works in a meat processing plant and is a livestock producer. Co-authors are agricultural education and meat science faculty who raise, and market animal products raised on their family farms. Throughout the duration of this case study, we operated under a constructivist epistemology, allowing for the co-construction of ideas to provide insight about the complex world of meat processors.

Data sources for this case study included an hour-long observation at each processing plant, a 1-2 hour loosely structured interview with owner-operators, document analysis of 6 company websites, and field notes from the lead researcher. We analyzed all data using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), engaging in simultaneous data collection and analysis as recommended by Stake (1995). First, each member of our research team open-coded all data sources, tagging relevant data from interviews, observations, websites, and field notes. Next, we worked together using axial coding to relate categories of data to one another. Finally, during the selective coding process, we identified core categories of data and transformed categories into themes. We also designed a *vignette* to help provide context and insight into the setting of the case (Stake, 1995). The team engaged in reflective memoing throughout all phases of the data collection and analysis process.

We established *credibility* through engagement in the field and triangulation of data sources and investigators. The manuscript text includes a rich description of findings to promote *transferability* to other contexts. Processes have been outlined in detail creating an audit trail, establishing *dependability*. Establishing author positionality and reflective memoing support *confirmability* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## Findings

*Vignette: In the middle of the afternoon, I walk into a traditional processing plant and nearly bump into a couple in their 70s peering in coolers and carefully choosing meat for the week. A middle-aged woman wearing a t-shirt and jeans with glasses on her head and bags under her eyes is attentively listening to a young technician for the point-of-sale company who is installing the plant's new credit card machine. Her husband and co-owner of the plant walks out of the fabrication room with his arms full of new product for the display case, donning a meat and blood-splattered apron. Throughout my visit, the phone rings continuously, the busy owners continue to help customers while learning how to operate the new credit machine under the technician's guidance, and try to carve out time to finish the last of the meat cutting for the day.*

### **Research Question 1: How do owner-operators train employees in small meat processing plants in the state of Missouri?**

#### **Theme 1: Hands-On Training to Develop Technical Skills**

Interviews with owner-operators suggest the main way small meat processing plants in the state of Missouri train new employees is through hands-on training, starting with basic, fundamental steps. Jackie begins by allowing employees to start on low-cost cuts to trim out, so employees can learn what it feels like doing knife work. Letting employees experience knife handling is vital to the job, and this is a hard concept to teach without hands. "They can start learning safety of where their hand is versus where their knife is. They can learn the difference between cutting through fat versus muscle tissue."

#### **Theme 2: Allowing Employees to Make Small Mistakes**

Owner-operators are training employees by allowing employees to make small mistakes and learn from them. Cutting and processing meat isn't something all new employees know right from the start. Jackie told researchers, "We'll start them on soup bones or cross-cut shank...it's not a super costly cut of meat, so if we have to replace or refund somebody, if we mess something up. Learning how to transition into letting other people do those things, it's very hard. Letting them fail in places where are not going to be detrimental so that they learn better is really hard." Over the years, Jackie has helped her parents understand the value of allowing their employees to fail when it is not a crucial step to allow them to grow as employees by learning from these mistakes. At first "they didn't understand the structure, they didn't understand why am I doing this, but once they did things a few times, then it clicks."

#### **Theme 3: Checking for Understanding**

Checking employees' understanding to see if they can perform at the level they are expected to throughout the process is a critical training step. Michael and Dedre check for understanding in their plant by having their employees write out the steps of doing necessary functions for processes in the plant. "They had to write up a whole list of like this is how I call the trailer log for the week for farmers. This is how I clean up the kill floor. This is how I assemble the captive bolt. This is how I stock retail in the morning... You need to know and you can't just rely on what is in your head, and expect everybody to know and provide the same level

of service and accuracy with those things.” Another plant has a system in place where employees glance over the work of other employees to ensure the end product is correct before going to the consumer. Charlie explained, “We call it checks and balances...because there’s a lot of different eyes going on (the product).” Having employees who know the ins and outs of products allows multiple opportunities for errors to be addressed before the product is put on the shelf.

#### **Theme 4: Responding to Employee’s Individual Needs When Learning**

Over the years of training new employees, some participants in this study have come to understand that not every employee learns the same way or at the same pace. In Jackie’s interview, she said “It’s just determining, this person’s strengths are this way, or this person is a very visual learner versus this person, you can tell multiple things than they can retain it and go do it. This person needs to see it. ... Through the years we have learned that this person can respond this way, these people respond this way...you know, it doesn’t always work the first time. Sometimes we have to try another way and so, it’s not a cookie cutter.”

### **Research Question 2: What are roadblocks to employee training in small meat processing plants in the state of Missouri?**

#### **Theme 1: Choosing Not to Invest Time Now to Be Efficient Later**

Processing plants are driven by seasonality and schedules. As Freddie said, “We’re essentially manufacturing..., but everything you’re manufacturing is going rotten with extremely short shelf-lives...Working with meat is just a lot different.” With a short timeline and short shelf life for certain products, plants need to be extremely efficient to ensure a top-quality product is going out the door. Processing plants aim to be efficient all the time; no matter if they are working with new employees or seasoned ones. “I have zero patience when it comes to training people, and I have zero patience for stupidity..I just don’t want to deal with it, and I know I have to.” Training is an investment requiring time and patience, which some owner-operators lack.

#### **Theme 2: Failing to Know How to Do the Work so Others Can Be Trained**

Although most owner-operators within this collective case came in with prior experience processing meat, several started their plants with little hands-on training. Harold revealed to researchers he bought his processing plant with the idea that the existing employees would continue working there while he focused on another business he already owned. However, many employees left with the transition of ownership. Those who were “ready to step into bigger roles” were not prepared. Harold tried to step in to fill roles because “it is hard to find good, seasoned help who knows what they are doing”. As the owner of the plant with a background in technology but little experience in meat processing, he found training employees to be difficult.

#### **Theme 3: Struggling to Share Control**

Owner-operators who have grown their business and hired additional employees are in the habit of doing everything themselves. Jackie mentioned how her dad often overcorrected when an employee used a different approach but still could create a consistent product. Transitioning to utilizing employees instead of relying on their own abilities is challenging for small plant owner-operators. Shirley told us her family’s plant relies on a model that “no one else wants to use” because she and her husband do all the work themselves. Facing the struggle of giving up control when training employees, Shirley commented, “We’re about to drown and die down here, but it’s okay...we’re going.”

### **Recommendations/Discussion/Conclusions/Implications**

Case study research focuses on a bounded system and is not to be generalized. We are limited to what we can explore, explain, and define beyond the bounds of this case (Blinded, 2025). However, readers may take away insight from our lessons learned by reading about this particular case (Stake, 1995).

One owner-operator described the life of a meat processing plant owner-operator as “being a fireman”; constantly dealing with unexpected situations that surface throughout the day. The opening vignette reminds us of the organized chaos that small meat processing plants operate in. Operators juggle answering the phone, helping customers, calling technicians to work on broken equipment, handling payroll, and more. Yet amidst this organized chaos, time and resources are necessary for training and guiding new and inexperienced employees. Owner-operators tend to speed through the training process because efficiency is key when processing meat, but training is worth investing in. Some operators are hesitant to invest the real costs of time and materials needed for training. Veteran employees can perform tasks at a much higher speed than novices. Owners expressed a feeling of concern when allocating scarce labor resources when working with a perishable meat product.

Findings suggest meat processing plants in the state of Missouri are training their employees to do the work through hands-on learning, checking for understanding, and allowing them to make some mistakes. Owner-operators understand that not all employees learn the same way, and that directions may need to be individualized for maximum understanding. Owner-operators' understanding of differentiated instruction is a great asset when training new employees. A workforce is only efficient and effective if appropriate training and development is provided (Nda & Fard, 2013).

We recommend the design of training programs specifically for meat processing plant owner-operators to help them understand how to better help inexperienced employees successfully complete tasks within their Zone of Proximal Development. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) refers to the gap that occurs between the tasks learners can do independently and those they can complete successfully with guidance (Vygotsky, 1978). Training could be facilitated by extension in cooperation with other university faculty and local processing plants or butcher shops. These trainings could show owner-operators how to break information into chunks to present at a time, how to provide necessary background information to new employees, how to appropriately demonstrate the task to new employees, what guided practice during employees attempting the task at hand, how to support and correct employees as they learn in the guided practice stage, and how to gradually release them into independent practice (Wood et al., 1976). The result of implementing scaffolding in new employee training would allow employees to learn in an environment where they are able to accomplish the task but also improve their future performance (Davis, 2015).

Several owner-operators in this study did not come from a background in meat processing. Owners with little experience with the technical skills required for meat processing can be challenged when vital employees leave the plant. Offering technical, skill-focused programming could be beneficial to new, owner-operators like these as well as those who need a refresher on a specific skill.

Future research should further explore the learning needs of employees in meat processing plants. The studies should examine the onboarding process and immediate learning needs of new employees. This study provides insight into how training occurs in small meat processing plants. However, without understanding the perspectives of the employees who are being trained there, it will be challenging to design interventions that fully address the problem.

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