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PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES IN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN AGRICULTURAL FARMS IN ROMANIA: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

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Abstract

The lack of in-depth qualitative studies exploring Romanian farmers' perspectives on human resource management highlights the need for dedicated research on this topic. The present study examines the challenges farmers face in recruiting and retaining the workforce, developing farms, and ensuring their continuity. The research employed a qualitative method based on individual semi-structured interviews, and the analysis of the collected data was conducted through an examination of word frequency and semantic relationships within the interviews. The findings highlight significant challenges in attracting and retaining qualified personnel, particularly in less attractive rural areas. Farmers are aware of the need for continuous professional training and partnerships with educational institutions to enhance employee skills. Additionally, the development of an effective succession plan is identified as a viable solution to address current challenges. The managerial implications of the study include diversifying recruitment channels, using online platforms, and developing strategic partnerships.

Key words**:** *agricultural sector, human resources, employment, succession plan, challenges*

INTRODUCTION

The agricultural sector in the European Union has developed both quantitatively and qualitatively since the Second World War [34], with agriculture playing a multifunctional role [28]. It contributes to ensuring food security, protecting the environment, fulfilling a crucial economic role, and serving a significant social function [28]. If, historically, the primary function of agriculture was to meet the population's food needs, today this role entails the sustainable use of natural [18], material and human resources required for production processes. Resources engaged in economic activities become factors of production, with the main factors in agriculture being: labour, natural capital (land), physical capital and intangible capital [28]. Among these, land resources hold particular significance, being part of the primary factors category. The relationships between the factors of production affect, on the one hand, the productivity and profitability of agricultural processes and, on the other hand, reflect the trends and directions of change within the agricultural sector [19].

According to the latest statistical data provided by [9], the utilized agricultural area in the European Union represents approximately 38.4% of the land fund, with variations among member states. In Romania, according to information provided by the National Institute of Statistics, agricultural land accounts for 61.37% of the total land fund, placing the country among those with abundant land resources [15]. Although Romania's agricultural potential, driven by its land resources, is significant, the sector's low performance and competitiveness are attributed to the inefficient utilization of these resources, according to [35]. In 2020, the most recent year for which statistical data is available, there were 9.1 million farms in the European Union [9]. A downward trend in the number of farms is evident, particularly among small farms, with a decrease of approximately

37% recorded between 2005 and 2020 [9]. Of all the farms registered in the EU, more than half are crop farms, approximately 20% are specialized in animal husbandry, with the remainder being mixed farms. Nearly one-third of the total number of farms in the EU are located in Romania, although the majority are subsistence and semi-subsistence farms – less than 5 hectares in size [9]. The study conducted by Tudor (2014) shows that bipolarity is the defining feature of Romanian agriculture, with 30% of the utilized agricultural area (UAA) being exploited by these small farms, characterized by low productivity and insufficient technical equipment, while half of the UAA is managed by commercial farms, which are much better capitalized. In addition to the efficient use of agricultural land, the labour force is a determining factor in achieving agricultural production, influencing both productivity and competitiveness in this sector [29]. According to the agricultural census conducted by Eurostat in 2020 [9], the labour force employed in agriculture represented 4.2% of the total, with a declining trend. Romania leads the rankings in terms of the agricultural workforce, with approximately 20% of the labour force working in this sector in 2020. Our country was followed by Bulgaria, Greece, and Poland [9]. On the opposite end, countries such as Sweden, Germany and Belgium had less than 2% of their population employed in agriculture. The largest decrease in the population employed in this sector between 2005 and 2020 was observed in Romania, at nearly 12% [9]. The decline in the agricultural workforce is linked to the depopulation of rural areas, the loss of attractiveness of the agribusiness sector, as well as the consolidation of farms, which led to a reduced demand for labour in agriculture [25]. Although the support provided through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has had a favourable impact on the economic sustainability of the agricultural sector, the CAP has failed to balance agricultural incomes with those from the non-agricultural sector and to increase the attractiveness of the sector [12]. Most farm managers in the European Union are at least 55 years old, with the percentage of younger managers, under 40 years old, being relatively low, at around 11.9% [9]. This characteristic of the agricultural workforce is highlighted by [29] and [6], who emphasize the ageing phenomenon, with middle-aged and elderly individuals predominating in agricultural work [36]. Low incomes from agriculture sometimes discourage young people from getting involved in this sector [30]. Thus, a complex picture of the demographic and gender structure of the agricultural workforce emerges, highlighting the challenges related to the sustainability of this sector. According to Eurostat data [9], 68.4% of all farm managers are men. While young people generally manage larger farms, older individuals manage most subsistence and semi-subsistence farms. According to [30], agricultural workers possess multiple skills necessary for farm management, but the level of professional training remains low. [25] draw attention to the importance of increased quality of human capital in agriculture, which can contribute to increased labour productivity and higher incomes. A well-designed and implemented recruitment process can significantly contribute to improving the quality of human capital in this sector. As emphasized by [8], recruitment is an essential human resource management tool in agriculture, especially in the current context, with its success depending on the methods chosen. Thus, the application of effective methods can either maintain or undermine a farm's competitive advantage [8]. The results of the same study show that farm managers prefer traditional recruitment methods, based on: recommendations, internal recruitment, recruitment of candidates who approach the employer directly, and collaborating with the Labour Office. The least used methods are those related to outsourcing recruitment services and using intermediary agencies [8]. Interaction with potential candidates, the process of recruiting and hiring them, constitutes a significant responsibility for farm managers, both from an individual and societal perspective [33]. On the other hand, the attractiveness of the agricultural sector to the younger generation, according to [13], depends on the benefits offered in job advertisements. Thus, their results demonstrate that the most

appreciated benefits are holidays and free time, while the least appreciated are those related to achieving a balance between professional and personal life. According to [16], employee satisfaction in the agricultural sector is strongly influenced by financial aspects. However, there are differences in motivational factors depending on age, education, and the position held on the farm. The attractiveness of jobs in agriculture is also influenced by the employer brand, which reflects the image and reputation of the farm. This can be supported through an organizational culture based on respect and recognition, the effective implementation of human resources activities, the establishment of efficient management processes, and increasing the level of general public awareness regarding the farm's activities [36]. At the same time, the results obtained by [14] show that organizational culture, self-esteem and motivation at the workplace significantly influence employee performance. The recruitment and retention of good employees, according to [23], depend on the employer's ability to highlight the farm's culture. Thus, farms that encourage continuous professional training and commitment to the success of the farm can recruit and retain dedicated employees [23]. The importance of professional training is highlighted by [24], who shows that insufficient training of farm employees or their lack of skills increases the risk of incorrect interventions or harmful decisions, negatively affecting the performance and sustainability of the farm. In the opinion of [1], building a set of competencies that support farm employees' adaptation should start with educational institutions that train specialists in the agricultural field. Creating a bridge between the educational system and the economic environment is essential, and the involvement of employers in developing skills training programs and offering internships for students and pupils are just a few examples of initiatives that can contribute to improving the quality of human resources on farms [1]. Human resource management in agricultural holdings should focus on individualized tools that consider the stages of the employee's life and career [16]. Work within farms is evolving, according to [22], depending on changes in the distribution of responsibilities, the structure of work organization (flexibility versus specialization) and the degree of autonomy granted to employees. This evolution of work organization and adaptation to the needs of employees are closely linked to the broader challenges of the agricultural sector, such as farm succession, an issue identified worldwide [32]. Family farm succession represents a process influenced by a combination of socio-economic factors, which vary from one region to another. The issue of farm succession in the European Union is amplified by the ageing of farmers, the abandonment of agricultural land in certain regions and the depopulation of rural areas [6]. Farm succession is thus limited by multiple constraints and barriers, which threatens the competitiveness and sustainable development of the agricultural sector. These factors contribute to creating a complex context in which farm succession is becoming an increasingly difficult process. A key factor in succession in family farms is the migration of young people to urban areas, which reduces the number of potential successors [10]. In addition to this phenomenon, another factor complicating succession is gender differences, which influence women's perceptions and involvement in the process. Thus, women are less involved in the generational transfer of agricultural holdings because they perceive agricultural activities as less attractive [5]. At the same time, [2] shows that succession is influenced by social norms, traditions, and the legislative framework, which vary between European countries. Factors such as the social acceptance of agriculture and the perception of the quality of life in rural areas influence the decision to take over a farm. Thus, in determining the succession decision, cultural factors and social norms are often complemented by economic aspects, such as the profitability of the farm [26]. At the same time, according to [5], an opinion supported by [32], education, access to professional training, family and community support, as well as agricultural policies and financial incentives (such as subsidies or programs for young farmers), play an essential role in determining succession. On the other hand, [3] highlight the

impediments in the succession process, which are represented by a smaller farm size, respectively a low economic viability, as well as the lack of family support. The socio-emotional factors and family support playing a key role in the long-term success of family farms are aspects also mentioned by [27]. To overcome these barriers, public policies and support measures become crucial in facilitating the succession process. Another important aspect is the perception of economic risks associated with succession, such as taxation, long-term costs, and the risk of property fragmentation. According to [21], these risks, along with existing public policies, discourage farmers from proceeding with the transfer process, leading to significant delays.

At the same time, [26] argue that farm succession is an essential component for the long-term resilience and sustainability of agriculture, that it is more than just a family issue, and that public policies (as supporting measures) should be adapted to address the diversity of regional and sectoral challenges. In the context of these challenges, alternative succession options are also emerging, providing viable solutions for farmers facing difficulties with the family transfer. While succession is generally discussed primarily in terms of transfer to family members, [31] show that succession can also occur through sale to third parties or strategic partnerships, the farmer's choice being influenced by the size of the farm, the family structure, and their long-term goals.

Building on the lack of in-depth qualitative studies exploring the perspective of Romanian farmers on human resource management, the present research aims to achieve the following objectives: evaluating human resource management practices in agricultural farms in Romania, including recruitment, selection and employee evaluation methods; identifying the main challenges farmers face in managing human resources and the strategies used to overcome these challenges; analyzing farmers' intentions regarding the development of their farms in the coming years, including expanding the team, diversifying activities and training employees; investigating the impact of the employer brand and employee loyalty policies on their retention and motivation; exploring succession plans in agricultural farms and identifying the factors contributing to the success of these plans.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to achieve the proposed objectives, the authors used a qualitative research method based on the semi-structured interview. The main aspects addressed during the interview were related to the description of the farm (3 questions), human resource management (15 questions), farm activity management (2 questions) and farm succession (13 questions). The interviewed participants were represented by 15 farmers from Romania. The Nvivo program, version 12.2.0.443 (32-bit), Pro edition, developed by QSR International, was used for data analysis. The interview transcripts were grouped into 15 separate Word Document (*.docx) files and imported into the program. Each file was then transformed into a profile of the analyzed farm by introducing and assigning case classifications, using the relevant variables found in the interview guide, both from the farm description section (year of establishment, county, area, type, form, etc.) and from the other topics of interest (intention to expand the area and hire new employees, method of promoting job advertisements, employee qualification level, salary bonus, career plan, succession plan). Furthermore, each uploaded and classified profile provided annotations for the four main themes included in the interview guide: description, human resource management, activities and succession. These themes were analyzed separately when considered appropriate (e.g., word frequency). The information thus uploaded into the program facilitated navigation, classification, and the frequency of the variables of interest. The focus of this analysis was on interpreting the frequency of encountered words and the relationships between them. Thus, "word cloud" and "word tree" graphics were generated to illustrate the frequencies and relationships between words encountered in the interviews and to facilitate the identification of farmers' issues and the proposal of solutions to address them.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Farm description and general context

In terms of typology and size, farms vary significantly in terms of area (Table 1), ranging from 35 ha to 5,000 ha, with the majority (n=6) falling within the 2,401 - 4,800 ha range, with an average size of 2,124 ha. Most farms focus on field crops (n=11), with a few exceptions – mixed farms that also include livestock (n=1) or vegetable farming (n=3). Additionally, from the analysis of the 15 interviews with farmers (R1-R15), it is observed that the majority of the farms are organized as LLCs (Limited Liability Companies) (n=13), followed by those categorized as FE (Family Enterprises) (n=1) and SA (Joint Stock Companies) (n=1). The period of establishment of the farms varies from 1992 to 2019, and 80% of the farms analyzed were established before 2010, which may indicate stability and continuity in the sector. In terms of location, most of the analyzed farms (n=6) were located in Ialomița County, followed by Brăila (n=3). Other represented counties were Călărași, Galați, Iași, Tulcea and Vrancea.

Table 1. Area of farms analyzed

Area (ha)	Number of farms
0-25	0
26-75	1
76-150	2
151-300	0
301-600	0
601-1,200	5
1,201-2,400	0
2,401-4,800	6
over 4,800	1

Source: own results.

Regarding farm owners and managers, their age ranges from 31 to 65 years, many of them having agricultural education, although there are some exceptions with non-agricultural education (n=3). The farm administrator was most often the farm owner (n=6) or one of the managers (n=6). Most farm administrators are in the 46-50 age range (n=6), followed by those in the 31-35 age range (n=4) and those aged between 36-40 years (n=3). Most farmers expressed their intention to expand the size of their farms (n=9) or at least maintain the current area (n=5). Only one farm (R11) reported intentions to reduce its size due to economic or administrative difficulties.

Human resources management

Recruiting employees from the local community is preferred by most farmers. They recruit using recommendations or by spreading job advertisements through word of mouth within the community, while online job ads and collaboration with educational institutions are considered complementary methods. Similar results were reported by [8], who showed farmers' preference for traditional recruitment methods. At the same time, [4] observes that there is very poor collaboration between farmers and regional labour offices, and the use of online recruitment platforms is a rare practice.

Regarding the challenges encountered in the area of human resources, felt by the majority of farms (n=11), the most common issues are the lack of qualified labour and high staff turnover. The problem of lack of adequate employee training is highlighted by several farmers, who report that many of the available candidates do not meet the minimum requirements. The aforementioned difficulties were reported by R4, R5, R6 and R11. The results of previous studies identified in the literature draw attention to the insufficient training of the workforce employed in agriculture [29], especially considering that the reduction in the number of agricultural workers should be compensated by increasing the professionalism of those who continue to work in this sector [20]. [17] emphasize the importance of training specialists in the agricultural sector and anticipating the demand for these employees on the labour market [17].

At the same time, the farmers participating in the study mention difficulties in finding and retaining employees, especially in more isolated rural areas. These challenges were also reported by [6], who draw attention to the vulnerability of the agricultural workforce in depopulated or less attractive rural areas.

The results of this study indicate that the partnership with the County Employment Agencies (AJOFM) was used only by larger farmers or those with specific needs (R8). As

identified solutions, some farmers have developed partnerships with universities and agricultural high schools to train and hire young people. Farmers seem to be accustomed to volunteering or internship activities, as only four farms (R4, R6, R14, R15) out of the total interviewed reported not having any students or interns on their farms. In some cases, farms provide accommodation for employees from other regions (R1), while others use local networks and referrals to identify potential employees (R3, R14). All farmers intend to either maintain their current number of employees (n=8) or expand their teams due to farm growth (n=7). Thus, maintaining the current team is preferred by farmers with already stable and efficient teams (R1, R2, R3, R7, R9, R10, R11, R14), while expanding the teams is targeted by farmers planning to increase cultivated areas and intending to hire additional staff for farm activities (R4, R5, R6, R8, R12, R13, R15). Therefore, farmers seem to want to maintain or increase the size of the team depending on the farm's needs. For example, R4 and R5 plan to hire agricultural machinery operators, and R12 intends to hire a storekeeper and a mechanic. Such targeted approaches suggest a tendency for moderate and cautious expansion. From the analysis of the responses, we can deduce that there is a close relationship between recruitment challenges and reliance on the local community. Farmers facing major difficulties in finding qualified staff tend to rely more on local relationships and recommendations, which may reflect a compromise solution in the face of a lack of better options. Additionally, education and professional training are seen as long-term solutions to address these challenges, indicating an awareness of the need to invest in human resource development to ensure the ongoing sustainability of the farms. Farmers often assess (n=12) the skill level of their employees between 7 and 8 (out of a maximum score of 10), mentioning that continuous training and the use of modern technology are essential to maintaining a high level of competence. Employee training is also conducted through internal courses. An exception is made by R13, a farm with a foreign owner, which gives a score of 2 to its employees. As strategies for employee training, it can be noted that participation in specialized conferences or visits to other farms are rarely encouraged (R1). Thus, to address their needs, farmers expand their training methods to include: internal training – farmers can opt for on-the-job training, sometimes with the help of specialized companies or equipment suppliers (R1); collaboration with educational institutions – farmers can collaborate with universities and high schools to train young people who will later be employed (R8).

Thus, training of farm workers is extremely important, whether it takes place internally or externally, an aspect also emphasized by [11], who shows that a high level of training will help farm employees to better use the information they receive, access government support programs, and adapt more easily to changes in the socio-economic environment. Additionally, the digitalization of agri-food production systems requires the development of digital skills among the agricultural workforce [7].

Regarding the benefits offered to employees beyond salary, most of the farmers participating in the study (n=9) provide mixed packages, while R3 and R5 only grant financial supplements to their employees. Three farms (R4, R6 and R8) provide only one type of benefit, namely agricultural services, agricultural products and excursions. On the other hand, R2 is the only farm that reported not offering any benefit other than salary. A concerning fact for the agricultural workforce might be that two-thirds of the interviewed farms stated they do not have a well-established career plan for their staff. Related to this situation, in a similar study, [16] emphasize the urgent need to integrate career planning strategies into the human resource policies of agricultural holdings.

In the present study, the farms that mentioned having a career plan for their employees were R1, R8, R9, R10 and R12. On the other hand, farmers often have (n=11) succession plans for their business; the cases where such plans are not present are mainly due to the legal and administrative forms of organization. The importance of legislative aspects is also

highlighted by authors such as [2], respectively [5].

Word frequency and relationships

From the word cloud graphic (Figure 1) resulted from the data analysis using the Nvivo program, it can be observed that "farm" is the most frequently mentioned word, which is not at all unexpected. However, it is also notable that the word "succession" is used prominently, both because it does not have many widely known synonyms and because it is the reference term for the respective action, but also because it was a main theme of the study.

Fig. 1. The most common words found in the transcripts of the 15 interviews with farmers
Source: Own results.

Beyond these two terms, discussions centered around the employees and their evaluation processes are also distinguishable, given the focus of a significant portion of the interview on the mechanisms of labour management in agriculture, as well as on the family, again, through the lens of the succession issue (Table 2).

Table 2. Word frequency (%). Words include all encountered grammatical forms

Word	%
farm	2.23
activity	1.23
succession	0.78
plan	0.75
employee	0.65
family	0.59
assessment	0.42
studies	0.32

Source: Own results.

The frequent appearance of terms like "human resource" and "recruitment" in the interviews highlights a constant focus on employee management. The term "local community", in its various forms, is a central term, emphasizing the importance of local relationships in recruitment and farm management.

At the same time, the frequent mention of the workforce may underscore the significant challenges farmers face in their recruitment efforts. Words such as "problems", "difficulties" and "unprepared" highlight challenges related to the quality and availability of the workforce. On the other hand, the terms "training", "instruction" and "investments" may indicate the desires or efforts to improve employee competencies. The frequent pairing of "recruitment" and "local" suggests that farmers primarily rely on local resources. Similarly, "employment" and "recommendation" are closely related words, reflecting that recommendations are a preferred method of employment. Training and education are also frequently mentioned, especially in the context of collaboration with educational institutions. Last but not least, farmers have also discussed strategies to promote their professional needs, which is why references to "advertisements" appear often.

Breaking down the most frequently encountered words across the main themes of the interview (Figure 2), differences in the construction of the discourse can be observed, influenced by the questions addressed.

Thus, the farm description is predominantly characterized by references to indicators such as turnover, land area or owner characteristics. On the other hand, the human resources and the management of activities sections include frequent references to candidates and employees, as well as various career plans, recruitment and retention strategies.

Fig. 2. The most frequent words encountered in the transcripts of the 15 interviews with farmers, distributed across the topics of interest into which the interview guide was divided: farm description (top-left), human resources (top-right), farm activity management (bottom-left), and farm succession (bottom-right).
Source: Own results.

Finally, the section dedicated to succession issues clearly focuses on this concept. Regarding the way in which farmers relate to their future intentions (Figure 3), they express thoughts about expanding the land area, as well as hiring personnel and developing partnerships (in this case, with a recruitment company).

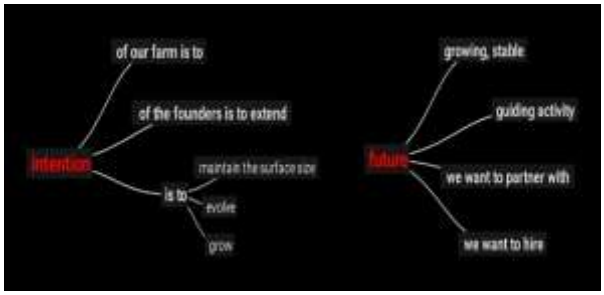

Fig. 3. How farmers relate to future intentions
Source: Own results.

Regarding the way farmers relate to candidates for deficient positions and the methods of evaluating them (Figure 4), candidates are selected based on aptitude tests and recommendations from the community, but they are not always the most suitable. The evaluation is not necessarily based on strict criteria, but practical aspects are taken into consideration.

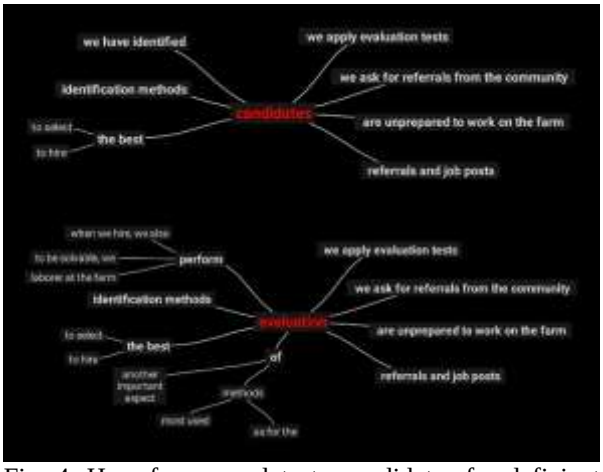

Fig. 4. How farmers relate to candidates for deficient positions and the methods of evaluating them
Source: Own results.

A strong consensus can be observed among farmers regarding the obstacles in recruiting labour from other areas. At the same time, in the discourse of many farmers, there is noticeable dissatisfaction with recruiting a high-performing workforce.

Fig. 5. The way farmers relate to work, especially the workforce
Source: Own results.

The lack of workforce is associated with challenges and risks, primarily linked to the scarcity of skilled labour.
The solutions were mentioned as such by the interviewees only in the context of succession, and the most accessible solution, family succession, was also the most frequently invoked.

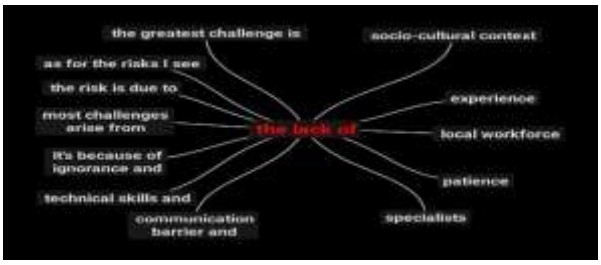

Fig. 6. How farmers perceive the lack of workforce
Source: Own results.

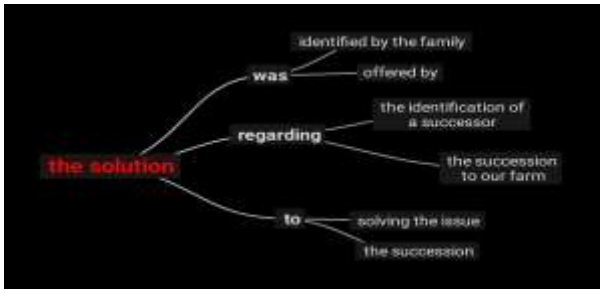

Fig. 7. The way farmers relate to solutions
Source: Own results.

CONCLUSIONS

Farmers in Romania face major difficulties in recruiting and retaining a qualified workforce, especially in remote rural areas. The existence of a well-trained workforce is essential, and its lack can negatively affect farm efficiency. However, there is a constant concern for training and developing teams, through various methods adapted to the needs and specific context of each farm. In the future, it is expected that farm teams will either be maintained or expanded based on the farms' growth plans. Solutions identified by participants include expanding partnerships with educational institutions and offering continuous training programs. At the same time, investments in better working conditions for employees (such as accommodation or additional benefits) could attract workers from other regions. Developing an effective succession plan, which includes the early identification of potential successors, the development of their skills through dedicated training programs, and the creation of a clear framework for the transfer of responsibilities, represents, in the opinion of the interviewed farmers, a viable solution to ensure the continuity of agricultural farms.

The managerial implications of the study are reflected in the following recommendations, which can support the improvement of farm performance and sustainability: diversifying recruitment channels by more actively integrating digital platforms and fostering closer collaboration with educational institutions; investing in training through continuous training programs for employees, in collaboration with equipment suppliers and universities.

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