

ESAF Case Study – Employer – New Brunswick

King Aquaculture Richibucto-Village, N.B.

Danny King, Owner

Located in Richibucto-Village in Kent County, New Brunswick, King Aquaculture has been a player in the province’s fisheries and aquaculture industry since 1969, when it dealt in oysters, crab and lobster. A family-owned business, it is now owned by Danny King, whose father Armand King originally founded the business.

A few years ago, the company sold the lobster and crab portions of the business and now deals exclusively in oysters, with the vast majority of its pre-pandemic sales going to the food service industry (i.e. restaurants) in the U.S. and Europe. Since the pandemic began, the company has reorganized itself to supply local grocery stores with its high-quality oysters. Mr. King is optimistic that foreign markets will return after the pandemic is more under control.

Not only has the company honed its focus over the years, but it has also experienced major changes in the availability of its labour force.

“Year ago, there were many employees available to us,” Mr. King explains. “As the years passed, demographic changes saw younger people leave the area for larger urban centres. As well, a variety of other jobs became available to those who remained. The economy has diversified. Even families are smaller.”

For King Aquaculture, this means that recruiting employees has become exponentially more difficult as time goes by. “A generational shift away from working in fisheries-related industries has really affected us, but that doesn’t mean we don’t need the employees. We still need them very much,” he says. “We just have to work harder to find them.”

That is one reason why the Essential Skills for Atlantic Fisheries (ESAF) program attracted his attention. “I said ‘Yes!’ right away,” he says. “Any help we can get is always welcome and wanted

– even if it means acquiring just a few more people when all is said and done. That’s how tight the labour market is.”

Programs such as ESAF which combine classroom training and subsidized on-the-job experience are an excellent way to get unskilled labour into the workforce for the first time or to help the long-term unemployed re-enter after a period of being away.

“People need to realize that – like any other crop such as potatoes and apples – we have seasons, too,” Mr. King says. “When the harvest is ready, the harvest is ready. We can’t tell the oysters to stop growing. And by the time we harvest them, it’s been five years since they started, so we need to get our 60 months’ worth of investment back by selling them. It takes five years to get paid from start to finish on oysters.”

This is why having employees available is so important to the industry. While King Aquaculture has been fortunate to have retained employees over the years, there is always room for more, especially with an expansion imminent.

“It’s so much better to recruit locally,” Mr. King says. “It’s faster and much more cost efficient. That’s why programs such as ESAF are beneficial because it introduces us to more potential employees who already live in the area.”

“People assume companies hire temporary foreign workers because they’re cheaper. In fact, it’s much more expensive. If we go down that path at some point, it will be because the local labour market is completely exhausted,” he says. “We have to get our product to market at a certain time. It’s the only way we make money – and we need employees to do that,” he says.

To maximize production and revenue, employers such as King Aquaculture need access to a pool of local employees, which ESAF is seeking to grow. Mr. King also stressed that King Aquaculture pays a fair salary even at the entry level of its operations, beginning at \$16 per hour.

Taking part in the second cohort of ESAF in 2019-2020, King Aquaculture would have taken up to 12 candidates but ended up with seven after screening potential candidates. Of those seven, two resigned and one was injured. Four employees remained with the company after the initial subsidized work term. As well, the injured individual is also expected to return.

The candidates who remained with King Aquaculture are good employees, according to Mr. King, and he has no hesitancy in taking part in a similar program again. “You never know what gems there are out there.”

Through the ESAF program, King Aquaculture provided the participants with two weeks of on-the-job training and six weeks of work placement, with the expectation that participants would be kept on after the project ended. Mr. King says he had no major issues with the workers from the program and they fit in quite well.

In future cohorts, Mr. King suggests that emphasis be increased on life skills such as accountability, which he feels is missing among some in the type of employee he is seeking. “We need people who know they have to show up for work and who know that others on the team rely on them showing up. You can’t just not show up with no warning and then expect everything to be OK when you return – outside of legitimate sick leave, emergencies or reasons which we’ve been made aware of in advance.”

Mr. King also suggested that – for some jobs – literacy and numeracy skills are not necessarily the most important skills required. He would have considered individuals for certain positions even if they could not read or write very well – or at all. “I would be happy to look at good individuals even though they can’t read or write. You don’t need that for every position.”

“Actually, I find it easier to hire people for jobs that require higher literacy and numeracy rates,” he says. “It’s the other jobs that are tough to fill, but programs such as ESAF can certainly be helpful in filling those by teaching essential skills required to work on a team, deal with pressure, and how to act professionally.”

“I would urge programs such as ESAF – and others – not to assume that participants whose literacy and numeracy skills haven’t improved much during the course of the program can’t offer something valuable to local employers. Someone’s attitude is just as valuable, in my opinion,” Mr. King says. He emphasizes that there is a place for these individuals in the labour market – and his company is one of them.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Mr. King made sure that he kept his employees calm and urged them to continue showing up for work. “We had to work and we made sure that we implemented strict guidelines. We stressed that we wanted them to remain safe. I needed them to continue to show up. That was very important,” he says. “I asked them to think of the long

term – after CERB – and the fact that we plan to expand our operations. In order to do that, we couldn't lose people to CERB, but it also meant that we had to make absolutely sure that our employees felt safe and looked after – and that there would be a payoff by sticking things out with us.”

When all is said and done, Mr. King says, it is tremendously more convenient and cost effective to hire locally rather than bring people in from other regions or countries. “If programs such as ESAF can help us source more local employees, I'll always participate without hesitation,” he says. “We have jobs for people at all levels.”