



IMPROVING ACCESS TO BETTER JOBS FOR WOMEN

**How improved business practices can increase
staff performance and businesses' outcomes**

THE CONSTRAINTS

Bloom Hills Rwanda, a floriculture company and one of IMSAR partners, mostly employs women, who represent 73% of the company's workforce; a trend common to most casual and formal labour across horticulture and floriculture companies. During IMSAR's scoping phase, the team found that female workers working at the company were constrained by low and fixed daily wages, the lack of formal promotions/career advancement opportunities and training opportunities fostering upskilling. Additionally, even if reportedly higher than the local average daily pay, salaries remained overall quite low for female workers, who oftentimes were unable to cover for personal and household expenses with their earnings from Bloom Hills.

This produced a dual issue, both from the employees' and the employer's standpoint: with salaries remaining low and no formal salary increases or promotions, there was a generalised lack of motivation among lower-level employees, which in turn meant high turnover, low productivity and poor performance for the company. In turn, this constrained the company's ability to obtain the quality needed to meet critical certifications necessary to access more remunerative international markets. The company was interested in establishing promotion scheme but needed advice on best practices.

THE SOLUTION

The IMSAR team worked alongside Bloom Hills, to explore possible **salary increases and promotion schemes** that could be offered alongside **training and upskilling** to female employees. The goal was to boost staff's income and motivation, on one side, whilst increasing personnel's retention and productivity at the company level, on the other – contributing to an enhanced business model that would lead to long-term increased efficiency and sustainability for the company. IMSAR supported and incentivised Bloom Hills to design a salary increases and promotion scheme targeting women employees, including:

- **Daily wage increases at the company level** – this was a generalised increment to the daily wage for all casual workers, initially subsidised by IMSAR and continued by Bloom Hills, aimed at providing better income to, mostly female, Bloom Hills workers. Thanks to the increases, currently daily wages at BH are higher than the local average and represent an incentive for staff retention;
- **Training and upskilling** – more regular and large-scale training was provided, which included harvest and post-harvest activities, such as applying fertilizer, weeding, watering, transplanting, picking, sorting, and packing. Additionally, upskilled women employees were capacitated into becoming trainers of new workers and skilled workers;
- **Promotions scheme** – the agronomists, who are in charge of supervising the workers on a daily basis, were given the task to choose who to promote on a monthly basis. They based their criteria on:
 - Seniority (how long employees had been working at Bloom Hills)
 - Consistency of attendance (how regular employees were in their work attendance)
 - Performance (employees' skillset level, type of tasks carried out, speed and quality).

THE RESULTS

Beyond the generalised increment to the daily wage for all casual workers, a total of 26 promotions were carried out, and they all consisted in a wage increase for the chosen employees – in other words, the daily wage of the promoted employees was increased on a permanent basis. These workers were promoted from unskilled to semi-skilled or skilled workers. The promotions were announced by gathering all employees on the factory floor, and during the assembly the lead agronomist informed company staff that a round of promotion was taking place and the chosen employees were subsequently called out. The trainings were also effective and beneficial and allowed a selected number of workers to distinguish themselves for the quality, speed and overall efficiency of their work across all tasks required by the company at the various stages of production. 85% considered the trainings to have equipped them with skills that make them more employable beyond Bloom Hills. The generalised salary increases, the round of promotions targeting selected employees alongside the upskilling trainings, delivered several benefits that were perceived by all stakeholders at Bloom Hills.

Female workers who were promoted and those whose daily wages increased reported that this advancement meant a great deal to them, for a series of reasons.

- **Economically** – the salary increases associated to the promotion (which in some cases led to a daily stipend of twice the amount of the minimum daily rate) allowed them to cover for all household expenses – both for the single mothers and for the married ones whose husbands do not have steady jobs. It is estimated that women recorded an additional annual income of RWF 143,296 (£ 105). Beyond the increase in incomes, 45% of the workers indicated job stability as a key benefit, since they are assured to have a stable job vs the instability they faced prior to joining Bloom Hills;

- **Personally** – several female workers reported this was the first time in their lives their contributions and their value were publicly acknowledged; when this concept is set against the context and background, it acquires an even greater meaning: most of these women face a double workday inside and outside the household (including caretaking, housework, farming etc.) and all this work is usually taken for granted, unpaid and unacknowledged. The publicly announced promotions produced an increase in the female workers' dignity, self-confidence, trust, respect, esteem and overall perception of what they can achieve – both at the self-level and for those who surround them, including at the household and community levels. Several workers who were promoted mentioned that their vision for their future now sees further training, studying, becoming trainers and supervisors themselves, opening their own side businesses and engaging in other income generating activities – especially when thinking of their future and the day they will not be able to carry out physically demanding jobs anymore.

"My husband listens to me, I am valued as a woman who earn some money. I convinced him to control births and not have many kids. We are sure to get food every day which wasn't possible before. Other women respect me as well and consider my views when we are in meetings of our saving groups"

"My mom appreciates my role in the family since I bring some money to cover some expenses. Other youth see in me someone who had problems and became a single mom but who can stand now and fend for her family"

"At home people have more respect for me. My kids appreciate when they ask me something and I can provide. My husband also respects me since I am earning some money. The community trusts me as well since I can make some money as well"

"I no longer ask for everything and it makes me feel confident"

The female workers who were not promoted reported that learning about the promotions encouraged them in **working harder and being more regular and steadier in their attendance** at Bloom Hills, as they realised that the employees who were promoted were the ones with the highest frequency of attendance and efficiency.

The agronomists, who have a supervisory role over the workers and were the ones in charge of conferring promotions, reported that these advancements led to a lower turnaround and a higher level of satisfaction among female workers at Bloom Hills. Moreover, as Bloom Hills increases its production capacity, the company continues to hire more women workers (so far 130) even without after IMSAR's support. Also, the employees promoted started showing new levels of empowerment and initiative by taking responsibility and actively reaching out to the agronomists to ask for new tasks or exploring can they do things even better. Another improvement witnessed by supervisors was that workers are now more independent; they focus on results, and agronomists do not need to supervise them as much as they did before. Finally, they witnessed employees also becoming quicker at their tasks and the quality of flowers improving overall.

Mr. Harada, the owner of Bloom Hills, also reported being satisfied with the results of the salary increases and the promotion rounds. He witnessed higher employees' retention and better performance levels; additionally, he is now considering further improvements, including offering more stable and long-term contracts and possibly contributing to childcare through co-payment schemes for creches or similar initiatives, given the high number of female workers he employs, and the fact he prefers women to men as he finds them more stable in their attendance and better at carrying out the tasks required by the company.

KEY CHALLENGES AND LEARNING

The salary increases and the promotions that took place at Bloom Hills with the financial and technical support of IMSAR were largely a positive experience – according to the company's leadership and staff. There are some key challenges and learning that can inform upcoming rounds of promotion at the company but also future projects and companies planning to carry out these measures in similar contexts or sectors.

In terms of **messaging**, the way the promotions were announced at Bloom Hills was by gathering all workers in an assembly where the agronomists disclosed that promotions were taking place and read through a list of names of employees who had been chosen for the advancement. Non-promoted staff reported that this methodology left them with several doubts, as criteria for promotions

were not clearly explained, therefore even thou they did feel motivated in trying to achieve a promotion themselves during the next round, they would not know what to do better and what to work for. Also, all staff (workers and agronomists) mentioned that there are no dedicated spaces, nor the custom, for workers to carry out consultations on such matters with company management or leadership. Consequently, the learning points include:

- **Promotion rounds should be presented with enough advance and with clear messaging around criteria** to be met by workers who are aspiring to be promoted. Even thou most non-promoted workers are still aspiring to receive promotions during the next round, they do not understand at present what they need to do differently, or better, to achieve them. Also, there was a small number of workers who reportedly left because of the lack of clarity and demotivation.
- **Direct interface and dialogue sessions should be made available for employees who are not selected** for the promotion with company's leadership to explore improvement areas together. In general, and culturally, most workers in Rwanda who come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and with lower levels of education do not feel empowered enough to request to meet with company's management and leadership to simply "go and ask (or tell)" when they have doubts or issues. Therefore dedicated spaces must be offered by the company to promote open dialogue.

Beyond the solutions implemented by Bloom Hills, the interviews highlighted other options which could lead to similar outcomes, and/or strengthen impact further, which could be explored by agribusinesses facing similar challenges related to retention and performance.

- **More stable contracts and monthly pays.** At present workers are engaged and paid on a day-to-day basis; this does not allow them to plan families' expenses, nor allocate their earnings towards mid- and long-term budgeting. Mr. Harada mentioned that the daily cash payments are also a challenge from a business standpoint (both in terms of cashflow and administration resources), therefore regular monthly stipends could be a win-win solution for both the company and the employees.
- **Complementary benefits.** Female workers reported that childcare and caretaking rely fully on them because of social norms and cultural expectations; in order to make time to carry out their daily shifts at Bloom Hills, they all have to find alternative arrangements that, ultimately, impact them in terms of time and/or money. Working mothers reported they would greatly appreciate, and use, any kind of childcare support that the company could offer – whether in the shape of a childcare facility (in-house or near Bloom Hills' premises) and/or co-pay mechanisms for one. A similar example is health insurance, which at present employees pay for on their own. If companies were to offer health insurance to staff and their households, or contribute towards it, this is likely to serve as an incentive for staff to retain their jobs, including by maintaining a high performance and meeting businesses' needs.

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