

INDUSTRY ARTICLE

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Work in the field instead of at home

In spring, there was a shortage of thousands of support workers due to travel restrictions imposed by COVID-19. At the same time, many people were out of work. This gave rise to ideas and solutions whose effects reach beyond the crisis.

Shortage of 30,000 seasonal workers

When Lorenz Schareina was crouching under the dark cloud cover of a cool spring in the Hallertau hop field, using his clammy fingers to wrap a delicate hop shoot around the wire provided for it to grow up, he constantly heard the voice of the hop farmer in his mind: "Wiring hops is the easiest and most difficult work of all." After a few days in the field, Schareina now understood exactly what he meant.

This young man from Nuremberg was one of thousands of newcomers who helped out in German fields during this very unusual spring – the spring of the coronavirus pandemic. After the closure of internal European borders and the start of strict travel restrictions right at the beginning of the agricultural season, there was a shortage of about 30,000 support workers. Workers from Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania and Slovakia were not allowed to enter the country. Farmers started to panic. How would they harvest the asparagus or strawberries from their fields this year? Who would help them to plant lettuce or wire young hops on the frames?

A suggestion from BarthHaas: "Come and join the hop crew!"

People like Lorenz Schareina, who studied brewing and beverage technology in Weihenstephan and works in BarthHaas Concept Brewery, were stuck at home like many of his colleagues after breweries had to shut down at the end of March. For Schareina and others, the opportunity to help out at farm in the Hallertau hop region seemed like a welcome change.

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Or, more than that, Schareina thought, maybe it can be a win-win situation for everyone. With the slogan “Come and join the hop crew!”, Schareina’s employer quickly set up a platform through which BarthHaas arranged spontaneous help for around thirty of its hop-growers in the Hallertau and Tettngang regions.

Along with Schareina, a group of trainees (brewers and food technicians) from the Jever Brewery also started working in the hop fields. “Some people who work more in the technical field had never seen a real hop plant before,” Schareina says.

The farmer explained to them what had to be done: three shoots per plant are trained clockwise on two wires. It always has to be the strongest shoots, and, if possible, two shoots of the same thickness. “You shouldn’t think about it too much, but you shouldn’t do it haphazardly either,” says Schareina. It’s the easiest and most difficult work. He did it for two weeks, from 7am to 6pm each day. Across 20 hectares, plant by plant. “It’s very monotonous, but then again it’s not,” he says. Because he soon realised that every plant is different.

From zero to 1.8 million in four days

It wasn’t just the hop fields that needed extra helping hands due to shortages caused by COVID-19. Asparagus and strawberry growers were fearing for their harvests. At vegetable farms and organic farms, there was work to be done that urgently required people. The *Bundesverband der Maschinenringe e.V.*, the self-help organisation of around 190,000 agricultural businesses in Germany, heard about this and helped immediately.

With a speed and professionalism that would make many an agile Berlin tech company envious, the association created a portal for agricultural support workers called ‘*Das Land hilft*’ (=‘The country helps’).

It took just four days between the decision to take action and the website going live. In the first twelve days, *Das Land hilft* website had 1.85 million hits and saw over 63,000 advertisements from farmers seeking help and helpers looking for farms.

“To a certain extent, we were able to rely on existing technology,” explains Guido Krisam, spokesman for the association. “Our association initially focused on providing machinery and workers, but for a long time now we’ve also been increasingly concerned with IT solutions”. Thanks to this head start, *Das Land hilft* has become the pivotal switching point for support workers joining the association from other backgrounds. Smaller initiatives and start-ups that had started out with similar ideas quickly joined forces with those at the *Bundesverband der Maschinenringe e.V.* and supplied it with their data.

Help that helps

And so it happened that, via *Das Land hilft*, airline pilots were picking strawberries all over Germany, student teachers were weeding, hotel employees were pricking asparagus, and yoga teachers were sorting vegetables. This is part of the coronavirus reality too: while farmers did not know how to manage their own work, hairdressers, event managers, club owners and people working in hospitality simply did not know what to do with themselves in the long weeks of spring 2020. So, it’s a win-win situation then?

Spokesman from the *Bundesverband der Maschinenringe e.V.*, Guido Krisam, thinks so on the whole. Of course, as is always the case with physical labour, some people have realised after a short time that this is not the kind of work for them. “But there are some activities on the farms that don’t take place directly in the field. If both parties are keen to make it work, it is always possible to deploy people so that everybody’s strengths are used efficiently.”

The hop harvest is now safe

Florian Weingart, a buyer at BarthHaas, is in contact with the Hallertau hop growers every day. He reports, “it was clear to everyone that you cannot expect the same level of performance from the spontaneous new helpers as our experienced workers – but everyone was grateful that anyone came to help at all.

And in the end, it worked out well with the workers in the Hallertau region: “The weather helped: it was relatively cool. Even though the planters didn’t make much progress with the training, it wasn’t too bad, because the hops didn’t grow as fast. In the meantime, everything is out of the danger zone. If

there is enough rain in summer, the hop harvest of the year of COVID-19 will be a good one,” Weingart says.

Side effect: greater appreciation for agriculture

Having newcomers in the field also has consequences beyond the mere completion of work – positive consequences, that is, as Krisam says: “We are often told by farmers that, although they have sometimes been a little overcome and overwhelmed by so many newcomers on their farms, they have never seen the average consumer so committed. Attitudes are changing in the long term.

And we’ve been hearing from many helpers on the farms that they were deeply surprised how much manual work is still necessary in agriculture today, how many steps are necessary until the products reach the supermarket shelves”. This, they say, results in a greater appreciation for agricultural products and agricultural work.

Lorenz Schareina confirms this: “Above all, I have great respect for farmers’ work, those who spend the whole day in the field doing the same things as we did.

“In the field, there’s time for discussion.”

“I found the discussions we had very valuable,” Schareina continued. “In the field, you just have more time to talk. You get out of your own world and you can get to know another.”

Guido Krisam tells us about a particularly impressive example: “We spoke with a hop farmer who had many students helping him, who were normally at Fridays for Future. A discussion took place about social issues. In the end, both the farmer and the climate protectors found that they had more in common than they thought.”

The platform continues to supply committed helpers

The most labour-intensive weeks have now all been completed in the hop sector, but other areas of agriculture still have theirs to come. The support worker shortage is an ongoing problem, said Krisam. Even though travel restrictions have been lifted, there is still a shortage of seasonal workers from abroad, as many have sought other jobs for this year. In this respect, the *Das*

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Land hilft platform will continue to exist to provide helpers who are committed and available. Perhaps even beyond 2020. After all, the exchange that it creates has, as all sides agree, its own great value.

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