



Grooms; how to inspire the next generation

Holly Grayton

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“Where did all the grooms go?” I recently read an article by Kelly Howling in Horse Sport asking this question, and she makes a lot of good points, mostly from the perspective of the employee. I believe there are a few more points to be made for Alberta particularly, with the idea of prompting discussion about the subject. The article being referenced can be found here: https://horse-canada.com/magazine_articles/where-did-all-the-grooms-go/

It has become fairly commonplace to say we are facing a generational issue finding hard working young people to fill the voids in the workplace, but this can't simply be the entire problem. The problem of sourcing great grooms is one that has several sides to consider.

Supply and Demand

The market for grooms is subject to supply and demand just like everything else. As there appear to be fewer readily available competent grooms, those who are competent and experienced demand a much higher wage, which employers are apt to pay in order to secure qualified staff.

This carries with it some ripple effects. Wages become inflated relative to the quality of work provided as employers outbid one another for qualified staff, often above value, in an effort to avoid being left with less- or un-qualified staff. This leaves a vacuum at the entry level, with employers racing to hire already qualified staff. The onus of training entry level grooms falls to employers who can't afford to enter the bidding war, but alas they may be unwilling or unable to take on the burden of the training.

Cost of doing business

How then does a business owner compete with the high salaries? Owners of farm businesses often take home less pay than their support staff at the end of the day. The professional bears the responsibility to the clients, the bank, and often carries a high balance on their credit card on behalf of the clients for entries, feed, and other incoming bills. They often work longer hours than staff to complete the management/organization that is ongoing after hours, and carry debt for equipment and facilities. For business owners it is a hard argument to get into a bidding war for qualified staff when the margins are so slim.

Kelly's article notes a starting wage of \$500 per week. In my research finding someone to work for \$500 per week is almost impossible. From my research among Alberta operations, wages for a 5-day workweek varied from \$15-25 per hour, \$120-200 per day, or \$31,200-52,000 per year. Most jobs offer a per-diem at horse shows to help with the cost of food (\$25 per day on average). Through research for this article I did not encounter a groom job that offers health benefits. Often times these jobs come with housing or vehicles, which will count as part of the salary, so these numbers may vary depending on the situation. Kelly's numbers are based on a 5-day work week (when in fact most jobs are 5.5 - 7 days per week) and 8-hour workdays, which horse show days definitely are not. Kelly's suggested \$500 per week, \$100 per day, \$12.50 per hour is below standard and minimum wage – at least in Alberta.



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Some level of overtime work is common in most industries with the exception of shift workers (i.e. servers, store clerks etc. with defined shifts that are paid hourly). Overtime in the horse industry is normally confined to horse show days or in the case of sick horses that require care. For salaried or daily rate workers time management is the responsibility of the worker and overtime isn't paid.

**More on 'An actual farm budget' to get the gist of how 'Business businesses' don't actually make any money – coming soon online.

The amateur effect

There are a lot of people in the horse industry that aren't in it as professionals. They don't rely on their horse business to earn a living; it is simply their hobby, passion, or side project. I have heard of jobs where a groom's responsibilities include care for only 2 horses. Most often jobs like these are for an amateur rider or a rider with many strings of horses on the road, with an 8-hour work day (or less) when not showing, and the wage is high in order to attract experienced and responsible people. The affect of these 'plum jobs' is huge. The person with this job will tell their friends this is normal, and this person may be less likely to want to go back to the more typical and more demanding job later on.

On the other hand, in defense of this situation, grooms hired for these jobs are left alone much of the time and are truly responsible for all things related to these horses – appointment management, entries, shipping, packing, decision making and often daily exercise. These added responsibilities when completed consistently and independently relieve burden from the rider and are deserving of appropriate compensation, to be sure.

The 'true business operators' however can't compete with the wages offered for this kind of job, and often times need to bring along the less experienced people, investing hours of training and encouragement.

Cost of living

I have heard grooms say they need to make more money to cover their bills. Alberta has the highest minimum wage in the country as well as a fairly high cost of living, so it is understandable that an employee would need to make enough money to pay the expected bills to live where they work. Housing in Alberta is expensive, and in spite of the economic downturn housing remains expensive. Just before the downturn demand for housing was so high many homeowners bought at an inflated rate, now they are unfortunately stuck with large mortgages in spite of the growing vacancy rate that should otherwise dictate a normalizing of living expenses.

Additionally, with newly imposed laws such as carbon tax, WCB requirements, and a rising minimum wage, small businesses especially will struggle to meet the demands of employees wanting to live in this province. These external factors affect the market for grooms in Alberta, again making the case that wages are not determined purely by quality of work. A business has to account for various tax increases, WCB coverage for everyone, and increased minimum wage all while looking for grooms that have expenses to cover for themselves – this is how we get to a general idea of a pay rate, before the supply and demand equation takes



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effect and further alters the conditions. The barrier to entry for businesses becomes quite high, as right out of the gate they must account for payroll costs that don't necessarily reflect quality of work, qualifications or experience.

Paid education

Grooms work hard. There is no denying that. But, hard work is what is required from this physical job. The more pressing issue is that good grooms come with knowledge, experience and a skill set.

There used to be a sort of step system to the horse industry. Nobody came in and thought they should be at the top of the ladder until they had paid their dues. This is perhaps changing.

I heard from someone reviewing resumes that an applicant had stated they were qualified to be an FEI groom. During the interview the candidate was asked to provide one rule that was applicable to FEI particularly that was not the case for EC shows... this person had no answer. This illustrates the point that it is all too common to want to bypass the stages of learning a trade or craft, and that often it isn't taken seriously that the aforementioned example is actually a really serious problem! An FEI level groom is a prestigious thing, and carries a significant responsibility that should not be overlooked. Shouldn't entry-level grooms allow themselves the opportunity to learn their trade, work hard and be paid less than the more experienced people that are teaching them to climb the ladder?

If you were to become an electrician you would have to apprentice at a substantially lower pay rate than you would expect to make after you finish your 4-year apprenticeship. For example, a first year electrician will make 50% of what a ticketed or completed electrician will make. On top of that each year of your apprenticeship you have to go to school – unpaid – for two out of twelve months. To relate this to our business there is no formal schooling required to start being a groom, and no formal schooling required to continue at any level. This in turn means no student loans, and no required number of years learning your trade. New grooms receive on-the-job training while also making a wage, which is different from almost any other job with what could be considered a 'lifetime of knowledge.'

Upon speaking with some grooms about this particular issue, they raised the point that they are taking care of the most expensive part of the horse business, and therefore should earn a corresponding pay rate. And I agree, the responsibility is huge and they should be compensated to match, but that responsibility requires the kind of accountability that can only come from experience. The check and balance on the wage to look after the expensive asset of the business with the caregiver is a hard sea to navigate without any kind of standardized set of qualifications.

Burn out

It's no secret there is a high rate of burn out for grooms – or any job within our industry. The long hours could be to blame for sure, and maybe we link that back to a low hourly wage when you break it down after long show days and so on. But are grooms burning out from the long days, stress, or treatment from



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employers? Or is it more? Is it that they don't feel they are valued enough as contributors? Do they have dreams to go to different areas within the industry? Become riders/trainers/judges/stewards etc. themselves?

From speaking with 'lifer' grooms it seems a common thread is feeling valuable: either to the employer or to the horses, feeling valued is what keeps them in the business. They have pride in what they do. Beautiful turnout, having their own tricks to make the horses feel good, pride in a beautifully kept aisle, being trusted not to cut corners, and feeling like their care makes enough of a difference that it contributes to the horses doing well in the show ring. These people aren't personalities that need constant praise, they know when they have done right by their horse and that's often enough for them. If these things don't resonate with you, it'll be a tough lifestyle to maintain.

Burn out is also a way of saying bored. Sometimes you get bored of the same circuit year after year, the same loading and unloading at the show, or the same horses doing the same things. That's ok of course, but to call it burn out is a bit unfair because that implies the work environment was overwhelming when really you just needed a change. Some of the 'super groomers' I spoke with have worked many places and moved around a lot. It's not uncommon to call show grooming a 'nomadic lifestyle' for more reasons than just living out of your car.

Industry checks and balances

In the corporate world there are annual reviews that would determine your quality of work and therefore determine your pay rate increase or bonus. An example of this is the 3-pronged review description system of meeting Threshold, Target and Stretch. Threshold implies the bare minimum is met, just meeting the job requirements; Target denotes confidence and competence completing all jobs without being overseen, capable of problem solving, looking ahead in the week and preparing what might need doing (in the horse industry this might mean planning a daily task list that builds to the completion of a 'project' like a horse show); and finally Stretch where the employee goes above and beyond, adding value, taking initiative for responsibilities typically handled by the manager.

In a corporate environment you would have to present your self-review to your manager and give examples to defend your review status. This is a situation that doesn't occur in the horse industry.

For the business owner, the most basic reason to have employees is to have someone take on tasks and responsibilities that alleviate stresses or allow for growth and expansion. For this to be true, the employee must be able to do their job well and without constant supervision or handholding. For example, a groom should not need to be reminded to complete routine tasks or be overseen in caring for minor injuries. It also means that if they have to stay late to complete their tasks that they will do so without passing off the responsibilities to someone else (or simply leave without doing it). This is just basic and doesn't qualify anyone for Stretch or 'Super Groomer' status leading to a raise, this is just meeting the Target.



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We are told we can be anything and deserve everything

In the most recent decades young people have been told they can be anything, and deserve the best of everything. This is great in theory. However, by doing this we have implemented the expectation of having respect before it's been earned. So how then do we inspire people to continue to be 'lifers' in our industry? It would seem right now employers are throwing money at the problem, but is that what young people are really after? If they were, we would be keeping more young people in these jobs, because even a lot of the grooms that work for amateurs in a well-paid relatively easy position move on to something else anyway. Maybe they are after the glory of top sport, the glamour of being on a winning team, the named position? So we dilute the value of 'Manager,' or 'FEI groom' and offer it up as soon as someone looks towards the door.

What you need to stick it out

I asked a few long-term super groomers what a prospective candidate for the grooming world should consider before applying for a job as a groom. They came up with the following:

- You have to want to make this your life... like your whole life. The barn you work for will take over your mind day in and day out, the people you work with there will be your social group, the riders you groom for will be the people you root for all day to win, the friends you make on the road will be long-lasting ones and boyfriends/girlfriends/friends that don't do horses will be hard relationships to keep.
- The work is lonely, it's a lot of time just you and a horse, or you and other grooms. It's not all glam of setting jumps for the Grand Prix.
- You have to be willing to learn and be the underling for a while... like not a month but closer to a year before you'll have the hang of how your new barn works.
- You have to earn respect on the same timeline as you learn your job.
- You have to be harder on yourself than anybody you work with and for.
- Loving horses is a pre-requisite but more than that feeling responsible to the horses is key.

What's the solution to finding and keeping these rare people? I don't know for sure, but I think it starts with paying a fair wage for experience offered, and knowing you may lose a few along the way if you don't offer raises and title upgrades when employees aren't ready. Business owners need to reciprocate with appreciation, enough time off, appropriate treatment of staff including holding clients to the same standards, valuing and respecting the work and efforts of employees as they learn, and appreciation of a job well done.

**Please note, this is meant to spark conversation. You don't have to agree, and I would hope you have your own personal thoughts and opinions about the way forward.