

Approaches to farming with disabled people at fruit-sorting sites in agricultural co-operatives —Through a case example of work contracted by JA HARENOKUNIOKAYAMA—

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1. Introduction

Expectations for agricultural co-operatives are increasing amidst the continued expansion and popularization of farming with disabled people. Initiatives related to farming with disabled people courtesy of agricultural co-operatives are becoming widespread across Japan. As the number of such initiatives grows, the approaches to this type of farming are also becoming diversified. For example, some agricultural co-operatives employ people with disabilities in their own agriculture-related businesses, while others outsource work to disability welfare service offices (hereafter, “offices”). Additionally, agricultural co-operatives are making efforts to support the matching of farmers who are short of labor with business offices that want to contract farm work. Under these circumstances, we present a case example that will serve as a useful reference for agricultural co-operatives that are attempting to help in farming with disabled people. JA HARENOKUNIOKAYAMA (hereafter, “JA”) is making efforts to request offices to contract agricultural work at cucumber sorting sites. While introducing this approach, the key points when such an initiative is implemented will also be summarized. The content of this paper is based on Kusano (2024), supplemented with the results of the field survey conducted in April 2024.

2. Background of Initiatives

Tsuyama Headquarters conducts farming with disabled people at JA. In the area where Tsuyamanambu Agri Center in Tsuyama Headquarters is located, cucumber production is thriving. In addition to the fact that the cultivated area has been expanding in recent years, due to the merger in 2019, also of note is the decision that cucumbers produced within the jurisdiction of the former JA SHOEI (presently Shoei Headquarters) will be accepted. As a result of this decision, the shortage of manpower for fruit-sorting has become a serious issue.

Manpower was initially secured by accepting students from the prefectural special-needs school in town for work experience and by outsourcing work to local businesses. However, it became increasingly difficult to secure human resources due to the aging of the employees at the fruit-sorting sites. Particularly during the peak season, there was a serious increase in the work burden on the employees, as there were days when they had to work until 9 pm to finish.

In 2020, JA was introduced to the Okayama Prefectural Farming with Disabled People Support Center (hereafter “Support Center”) by the Mimasaka Regional Agricultural Extension Center, the latter of which has been sharing information on labor shortages. Subsequently, in addition to letting the office employees observe the actual fruit-sorting process, JA held an information session. Later, the office was approached regarding contract work, and four offices (two type A offices, two type B offices) were contracted (in recent years, four type A, and one type B for a total of five offices).

3. Work Contract System and Work Content

The system for requesting work contracts is shown in Figure 1. As mentioned above, JA, which was introduced to the office by the support center ((i) in the figure), will arrange a work tour for type A and type B offices ((ii)). In response, the offices and JA will discuss contracting out the work, and if the offices want to do so, their employees will receive training on the work contracted ((iii)). Next, the employees at each office will undergo training ((iv)), and after ensuring that the details of the work can be communicated to the users (workers), JA and the offices will sign the work contract ((v)). Subsequently, the work will be carried out by the users, and JA will pay the contract fee to the offices ((vi)). The support center provides support for JA and the offices in this way, through the entire process of introducing the offices to JA, doing the actual work, and paying the contract fee.

The actual work mainly involves sorting and packing cucumbers and assembling cardboard boxes for shipping. During this, one office employee will accompany every seven users. In terms of communicating the work details to users, the JA personnel do not do it directly, but rather inform the office employees, who relay the information to the users. At this fruit-sorting site, work is carried out from mid-May to late October, with the peak season being from early June to mid-September. Offices outsource work during this peak season. Work is undertaken daily at the fruit-sorting site during peak season, and users take turns having days off. Working hours are generally from 9 am to 5 pm and 10 am to 2 pm or 3 pm, but this is determined in consultation with each user, and they may have different working hours.

Lastly, regarding wages and workers’ compensation insurance, the contract payment from JA to the offices is based on a

piece-work system, but JA ensures that workers in both type A and type B offices are paid at least a minimum wage. Each office provides the workers' compensation insurance.

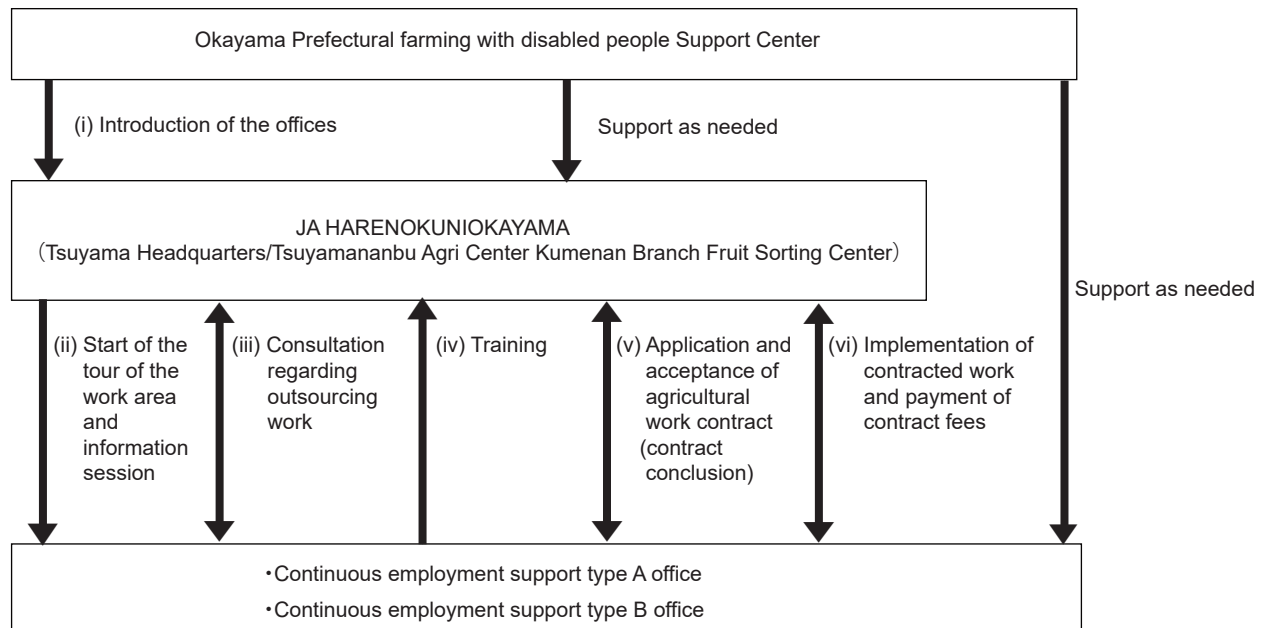


Figure 1. System of requesting agricultural work contract in JA HARENOKUNIOKAYAMA

Source: prepared based on interview results

4. Key Points of the Approach

The main points for JA when it comes to promoting such initiatives are as follows.

First, the cooperative relationship with support centers has become important. Through cooperation, JA's burden of searching for offices decreases, and such cooperation also allows JA to enter into discussions with the offices with peace of mind. Moreover, the support center provides support as needed, so that even if JA employees have insufficient information on or awareness of welfare, they can start the initiatives with a sense of security.

Second, the cooperative relationship between the office employees, fruit-sorting site employees, and JA employees has become important. For example, the office employee who accompanies the users during work relays the details of the work to those users, and when the communication is successful, it is easier for the users to work on their tasks. Additionally, JA takes into account what the actual users do while consulting with the office employees regarding the aptitude of each user, thus enabling the entire fruit-sorting site to be arranged such that work efficiency is improved. This efficient arrangement is particularly important at the fruit-sorting site, where the users work together with 10–20 able-bodied people. This can be considered a unique point when farming with disabled people at the fruit-sorting site.

Third, reducing the burden on the users is important. JA and the offices set flexible hours that take into account the physical condition of each user. In doing so, the burden on the users is reduced, allowing them to continue working for a longer period.

5. Improved Performance

The above initiatives led to various improvements in performance.

The average number of users working was 7–8 people per day in 2020/2021, but this increased to 10–15 per day in 2022/2023. The maximum number of people working was 20 per day. As a result, the sorted cucumbers amounted to a stable 452 tons in 2020, 521 tons in 2021, 581 tons in 2022, and 527 tons in 2023.

By subcontracting some of the work to the offices in this way, JA can handle the production volume of cucumbers, and the amount sorted is also stable. Moreover, before contracting work like this was implemented, it was common to have overtime work, but with the above-mentioned subcontracting, such overtime work has been reduced.

A significant effect on the offices that undertake the contract work was also observed. According to the “Non-Profit Organization Okayama Independence Support Center Momokkokumenan,” the fruit-sorting site is a place where the users can feel their connection to society, and it is said that working there is a good opportunity to acquire social skills. As the users work in

a visible environment, the sense of tension this creates can be beneficial for them.

This approach of requesting offices to contract agricultural work at JA's fruit-sorting site creates employment for people with disabilities in the community. Indeed, the aforementioned initiative, which alleviates labor shortages at fruit-sorting sites, has implications for many agricultural co-operatives trying to address farming with disabled people.



Work status at the Kume Fruit Sorting Facility

From the JA HARENOKUNIOKAYAMA website, accessed 29 Oct 2022
<https://www.ja-hareoka.or.jp/605-2/>

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