

Recruiting and Selecting Agricultural Employees

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Selecting an employee is among the most important decisions a manager makes. Getting the right person in the right position is crucial for business success. But how can you do that? How can you tell if someone you hardly know will be a person who can do all that the job will demand of him or her? How will you know if an applicant's personality will match your business philosophy? How can you spend an afternoon with someone and know if this is a person you would like to work with for the next thirty years?

The answer is simple: You can't and won't know for certain. You can, however, form a process that will take a lot of the chance out of employee selection.

Consider the needs of the position and the business

In the rush to make a hire, an employer is sometimes lax in considering the actual needs of that position. There are skills, licenses, personality traits, and abilities that an employee must have to be successful in any given position. Understand the job, and you'll understand the best possible person to fill it.

The first aspect of the job to be determined is the time requirement of the position—part-time, full-time, seasonal, or temporary. The applicant pool will vary greatly for each type of time requirement.

A *job analysis* is the process of describing and recording aspects of the job. This step is absolutely crucial, as it details the work that is done through observations, interviews with other employees, recommendations of experts, and work diaries. The focus of the job analysis should be answering basic questions. For example: will this person have to read, drive, lift, see, talk, listen, weld, calculate, stand, instruct, etc.?

The analysis should yield the following:

- the physical and intellectual requirements the employee must meet
- a comprehensive list of tasks to be performed
- an organizational chart detailing where the position fits into the overall operation.

While the analysis results in understanding the aspects of the job, it is not sufficient for truly understanding what a qualified applicant should be like. The next step is to take the employee

qualifications discovered in the job analysis and create a *job specification*—a compilation of the abilities, skills, knowledge, or licenses needed to do the job. An employer should take no skills for granted. If you are interested in hiring an individual who may have to mix and apply chemicals, do not be concerned merely with their physical capabilities and mechanical experience. You would also want to specify that a qualified applicant has adequate reading and mathematical skills. Job specifications might include items like a valid driver's license, the ability to drive a tractor, welding capability, and the ability to do basic mathematics.

The job analysis and specifications are combined through a *job description* to give potential and current employees an accurate picture of the position. In recent years, job descriptions have become very popular as a valuable instrument of employee management. From employee recruitment and selection to performance evaluation and feedback (see *Evaluating Performance and Providing Feedback*), managers are using job descriptions to ensure that the business and the employee have the same perceptions of the position.

A job description is always subject to change. It should change and evolve with the business, position, and employee. It can be as detailed or general, as need be, as long as it conveys an accurate picture of the position. While there are no set rules for what a job description should be, certain elements are standard. Consider the following example for a crop supervisory position with a family farm and swine operation.

Crop Production Associate

Position Summary: The Crop Production Associate will be involved in all aspects of wheat, corn, milo, and soybean production along with maintenance responsibilities on machinery, buildings, and livestock equipment.

Background Information: This is a three-generation, expanding family farm that operates a 4500 acre diversified crop operation and a 1400 sow farrow-to-finish swine facility. It has a strong reputation for long-term employment, with employee service ranging from 5-30 years. The business is currently expanding and values employees who are interested in increased responsibility and opportunities for promotion.

Qualifications:

- Self-motivated
- Mechanically inclined
- Enjoy working with other people
- Experience/knowledge in crop production
- Commercial Drivers License (preferred but not required)

Opportunities and Responsibilities

- Crop Production

The Crop Production Associate will perform and make decisions relative to planting, spraying, harvesting, and other tillage operations. Crop scouting and operating irrigation equipment will be an important part of the position.

- Maintenance and Repairs

Outside of the crop production season, the employee will be responsible for machinery repair and the development and maintenance of livestock and crop production equipment by utilizing mechanical, welding, and electrical skills.

- Working with personnel

The Crop Production Associate will work with a team of other employees and train new personnel. An ability to work with others is critical to the success of this position.

Most importantly, keep in mind the needs of your business. Do you need employees who will be able to grow and expand with your operation? Maybe you are interested in developing a team-based work structure where every employee will need to be able to work well with others. Understanding the managerial responsibilities and long-term commitment you will expect of an employee will help in recruiting and hiring the right people for your operation.

Build an applicant pool

Unemployment rates are at a record low in many parts of the country. This has left businesses struggling to find qualified applicants and has resulted in a management nightmare for many operations. Now more than ever, recruitment is a key concern in animal agriculture. It warrants a look at popular and successful recruitment practices—note the two are not necessarily the same.

According to one study, the most successful employee recruitment methods used by agricultural employers are word of mouth and referrals from current or former employees. In fact, many employers have had success by offering a bonus for employees who refer a qualified applicant who is hired and stays with the business for a certain amount of time. Other recruitment methods include government agencies, schools/universities/colleges, want ads, private agencies, and the Internet. Concentrated recruitment efforts are frequently much more effective in the long-run than a shot-gun approach where efforts are scattered and include random groups of people (ie. Advertising for a herdsman in an industry magazine rather than a regional newspaper).

By far the best method of recruiting new talent is to make your business the kind of place where talented and hard working people feel appreciated and valued. In every community there is one business that people think of as the “employer of choice.” Those businesses never have a hard time finding applicants—even with a tight labor market. Being a great employer makes it easier to retain quality people and develop a reputation of being the employer of choice (See “Building a Reputation as an Employer”).

Evaluate the applicants

Evaluating applicants can be difficult for managers to do. A complicated position will require looking at several skills that cannot be evaluated through one method alone. To determine if an applicant has all the necessary tools for a position, it is usually a good idea to run the applicants through some hurdles, or a series of evaluation tools. In many instances, one hurdle must be “cleared”

before an applicant can advance in the selection process. These should be created with the job analysis and specification in mind. Some examples of hurdles include the following:

Written applications gather essential information and gauge the applicant's ability to read and write. These forms may be used to narrow a large field of applicants based on qualifications—a good first hurdle.

Written tests are an excellent tool when technical knowledge is required. The format of the test can vary—multiple choice, short answer, or essay. They may be “open book”, allowing the applicant access to the materials available on the job. The applicant may have to examine a swine unit's breeding records or vaccination schedule and make decisions accordingly. Computer-based tests may also be a relevant tool.

Oral tests may help assess the applicant's communication ability and technical expertise. Examples may include asking the applicant to give instructions to other employees or discuss the structural conformation of a cow. Another good test question is to give the applicant a hypothetical problem and ask him or her to walk you through the steps he or she would take to solve it.

Interviews allow potential employers and employees to get to know each other. Interviews may take a serious, grilling tone or be very laid-back and conversational. Well-planned interviews that ask open-ended questions work best. Of course, some applicants may sound very impressive during an interview and disappoint once on the job. Other applicants may be made very nervous in an interview and miss their opportunity to shine. This is why it is always good to combine an interview with a practical test.

Practical tests require the applicant to perform one or more of the skills the job requires through a mock situation. The applicant may be asked to operate a piece of machinery, sort through a pen of steers, or load sacks of feed onto a trailer. A committee of other employees and farm managers should evaluate the applicants' performance on practical tests, reviewing their ability to perform the tasks. These tests also demonstrate the applicants' thought process—did they ask questions, prioritize tasks, and keep their composure if something went wrong? It is important to stress safety during a practical test. The test should be strictly

supervised. If the applicant is at risk of injuring himself or anyone else at any point, the test should be stopped immediately.

References require the applicant to provide the names and phone numbers of past employers. Keep in mind, some employers may hesitate to provide negative information about a former employee out of fear over lawsuits. Other employers may give glowing recommendations of unsatisfactory employees they want to get rid of. References from people you know and trust are the only references you can really rely on to give an accurate picture of a potential employee. Even then, people have different perceptions and personalities. So consider all these things when weighing employer references.

Create tools. After you have decided which hurdles you would prefer to use, take some time to develop each one. Prepare the job application. Formulate the questions for the written and oral tests. Set up the practical tests and prepare questions for former employers that you can ask during reference checks.

The decision to hire an employee impacts the entire business. For that reason, many managers utilize other employees in the selection process because trusted team members can bring valuable perspectives and insights into the process. Current employees can possibly write very relevant questions, set up excellent practical tests, and may notice many of an applicant's bad or good qualities that a single reviewer might miss. In addition, what better way to make an employee feel valued than to trust him or her with a responsibility that could impact his or her future working environment, or even, the future of the business?

Job preview. This allows the potential employee to get a good feel for all aspects of the job and the business. A well-written job description helps, but you may add to this by having an open-house for potential employees and their families or allowing an applicant to "shadow" a current employee for part of the day. If possible, exposing applicants to current or former employees will help in this process. The idea is to keep a new employee from being surprised by an aspect of the job he or she was not prepared for. Also, a good preview of the job might convince a highly qualified applicant that yours is a business they would want to be a part of.

Take the potential employees through the pre-established hurdles. If an applicant fails to clear a hurdle, he or she may be eliminated from the pool. Certainly, this process might be a very different approach than you have used in the past. One manager noted that well-qualified applicants liked his

approach that used a variety of the hurdles discussed here, specifically: a series of interviews with other employees, a hands-on practical test, and a written exam covering basic animal husbandry practices. The potential employees responded favorably, stating they felt they really got a feel for the business and its employees while having an excellent opportunity to showcase their abilities.

Let them interview you. Remember that evaluation goes both ways. While the applicant might not get the job if he or she does not perform well, you might not get a great employee if you do not put your best foot forward too.

Make a selection

After taking all applicants through a series of hurdles, it is time to make a decision and extend an offer. If none of the applicants meet your criteria, do not hesitate to re-open the application process. You might also hire a temporary employee and consider promoting that individual to full-time status later. That is acceptable, as long as the employee and employer both know this. It is very difficult to maintain a separation between temporary and full-time (probational) employees. Legal and employee morale problems may arise if the temporary employee expects to be made permanent and this does not happen. Be very careful in this area.

Making it work

Recruiting and selecting the right people for your business is a significant challenge. There are no easy solutions to these problems because every situation is so unique. The best advice for managers who are looking to recruit is to be innovative, persistent, and realistic. Recognizing the strengths of your business and the positions you offer will go a long way toward enticing quality people to build careers with your business.

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