



# Hire the Right Employee

In agricultural operations, growth is always welcome, but it often brings the necessity of hiring additional employees, especially when family members and/or existing employees are unable to cover an increased workload and responsibilities. When finding an employee becomes an urgent or even a critical problem, a rush to fill the position without preplanning can greatly increase the risk of hiring the wrong employee.

Managers face a major challenge in finding and keeping quality employees, says Ohio State University (OSU) Professor Emeritus Bernard Erven. However, hurrying to hire someone is not a good practice because a fit between what the business needs and what the new employee brings to the job is being left to chance.

In a university publication on recruiting and hiring outstanding employees, Erven writes that running a successful agriculture operation is already complex, with animals, equipment, financing, land and buildings being of great importance. However, it is wise to also remember part of an operation's goals are reached through people, and this requires having competent employees. Unfortunately, there is no simple or even complex recipe that

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by Janet Mayer

guarantees hiring success. The answer, he says, lies in each employer's developing a plan for filling employee positions.

Penn State University's (Penn State's) guide *Agricultural Employee Attraction and Selection* also recommends minimizing the risk of hiring a bad employee with a sound process for recruitment and selection. Finding the right employee for a position is important for the long-term benefit of any operation, and most successful managers have learned that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure when it comes to recruiting and selecting the right employees for their businesses.

Both Erven and the Penn State guide

recommend establishing a successful hiring plan using the following steps:

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## **Step 1: Determine labor or management needs and develop a current job description based on those needs.**

Most producers would not spend thousands of dollars on a tractor without understanding the jobs it is expected to do. Determining and understanding the job being offered will help the employer recognize the best possible person to fill it.

Begin by determining if the position will be full-time, part-time, seasonal or temporary. Do an analysis to describe and record all aspects of the job. Develop a job specification to group the necessary employee qualifications in terms of knowledge, abilities, skill or licenses.

In preparation of the job description, ask yourself these questions:

- ▶ Does this position require an employee to have good written and verbal communication skills?
- ▶ Does the job require the knowledge of mathematics?
- ▶ Does the position require interaction with family or other farm employees?

- ▶ Will the person have to read, drive, lift, see, listen, talk, weld, stand, instruct, calculate, etc.?

Now write a page-long job description — complete with job title, job summary, key duties, supervisory relationships and working conditions — that can be distributed to selected applicants when they are interviewed.

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### Step 2: Build a pool of applicants.

Although there are many methods of getting job applicants, word-of-mouth and the development of a network of other people in business, schools, colleges, government agencies, private agencies and through classified ads and the internet will probably generate the most applicants. The internet and want ads placed in newspapers and magazines known to be read by potential employees with agricultural interests have the potential of expanding the applicant pool beyond the local community.

If your operation has a reputation as an outstanding place to work, this will also be a powerful asset for generating a pool of applicants who have asked to fill out applications in anticipation of a job opening in the future. This is word-of-mouth working at its best.

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### Step 3: Review applications and select those to be interviewed.

The objective here is to reduce the applicant pool to the most promising candidates with no fewer than three people left for the interview process. In anticipation of evaluating applications, review the job analysis, specifications and description, highlighting the skills and qualifications you will need to evaluate during the selection process. Some applicants will be excluded from further consideration based on the essential information given on their application.

If you are having a problem narrowing your field of candidates, a pre-interview can provide the opportunity for a few general questions about experience and interest in the job. Once it is determined that an applicant has all the necessary tools to fill the open position, it is usually a good idea to run the applicant over some hurdles or a series of evaluation tools. These would include an interview and possibly a written test, oral test or practical

tests if applicants will be operating machinery, sorting through a pen of cattle, etc., all dependent upon the position they will be filling.

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### Step 4: Interview and check references.

There is no doubt that interviewing is difficult, but knowing how to do it well makes it easier. Well-planned interviews allow employers and potential employees to get to know each other.

Before the interview, prepare a list of open-ended questions that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Make sure to use the same questions for all applicants so they can be compared on the same criteria. As a general guideline, stay away from questions that are not directly related to the job and the applicant's ability to do that job. Because it is essential that the applicant understand the job you are filling, give the applicant a copy of the job description and describe the job in detail.

Before the close of the interview, encourage the applicant to ask questions of you, as the evaluation goes both ways. While you are interviewing them, they, in a sense, are interviewing you and your business. Close with information about plans for making a decision, and be sure to tell the applicant you will inform them of the decision either way.

If the applicant is still under serious consideration at this point, check references to confirm information already given and provide additional information. Some employers skip this step because of previous employers' reluctance to share any useful information out of fear of lawsuits. Asking about the most important contribution the employee has made is likely to be more helpful than asking if the reference knows of any reason you should not hire the person.

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### Step 5: Make a selection.

After all applicants have completed the evaluation process, it is time to make a decision and extend an offer. Strive to be as objective as possible given the job description, knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to do the job and the information available concerning each applicant.

If none of the applicants meet your criteria, do not hesitate to reopen the application process. You may also hire someone on a temporary basis with the intention of making it permanent if his or

her performance is satisfactory after a specified period of time. Be very careful with this type of arrangement, making it clear that the job is on a temporary, probationary basis.

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### Step 6: Hire and train.

Handling the hiring process in a fair and legal manner is important. Make an oral offer in person or by telephone, followed by a written offer that summarizes the key conditions of employment.

This agreement should include a description of the job and an explanation of compensation, benefits, work schedules and any other important details pertaining to the position. Performance evaluations should be done on a regular basis, starting early and continuing throughout the employee's career.

Training employees is vital in preparing them for success. They will need advice on everything from their relationships among coworkers to their own specific job responsibilities. Try to create an environment in which employees are not afraid to ask questions. Take advantage of a new perspective by taking the time to listen to both questions and ideas as new employees may bring a new approach to old problems.

### Summary

According to the OSU and Penn State guides, how employees are hired, managed and motivated makes a huge difference, since about 40%-70% of costs in production agriculture are related to labor costs. Labor management is much more than forms and paperwork. It is more about finding creative new ways of increasing productivity and reducing loss. The effective management of these costs plays a vital role in the competitiveness of agriculture.

Erven says many people say they don't have enough time to follow all these steps, or they say they don't feel they are necessary, while others say they don't know anyone who pays that much attention to filling a position. His question to them is: Do you maximize your chance of hiring the "right people," or do you leave your success to chance? Each employer answers this question directly or indirectly and then lives with the answer.

