

Human Resource Considerations for the Hiring Season

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Human resource issues may be the last thing on your mind as you prepare for the growing season, but labor management should, in fact, be high up on the list of things to consider.

In general, risk management on the farm is split up into five categories:

- **Production** – risks that affect yield or quality including weather and pests.
- **Marketing** – risks that affect price.
- **Financial** – risks that affect cash flow, expansion, estate and retirement planning.
- **Legal** – risks related to regulatory compliance, liability and farm succession.
- **Human Resources** – risks related to labor resources, health and safety.

However, many of the risks that may inhibit farm success such as low crop yield or law suits are a direct result of the quality of farm labor. Unhealthy working conditions causing employees to get sick or injured can result in legal issues; careless hiring of inexperienced workers or lack of adequate training can result in damage to crops and machinery; inadequate compensation and lack of encouragement can result in employees with little pride in their work and thus little care in ensuring a quality harvest. In addition, the 2002 Census of Agriculture showed that the cost of hired labor constitutes the second highest percentage of total farm expenses in Vermont. With a large percentage of farm costs going toward farm labor, it is important to make sure that the money is well spent by starting out with a carefully organized hiring process.

Assessing Farm Labor Needs

The first step in a successful hiring process is determining exactly what labor needs the new employee is expected to fulfill. Do an analysis of the current structure of labor at the farm: who has what responsibilities? Is there a way to restructure before hiring in order to smooth out operations? Where are there gaps that need to be filled? Once this analysis is done, the labor needs of the farm should be clear and a job description can be prepared.

Job Description

A job description should include the following information:

- a job summary
- qualifications needed
- responsibilities, tasks and duties
- supervisory relationships
- hours
- working conditions
- salary and benefits

Be brief but accurate in describing the position. Consult current employees for input on description accuracy, and look at job descriptions from other farms for ideas.

Advertising a Job Opening

It is useful to use a variety of methods to advertise a job opening at your farm. Word of mouth, written advertisements in newspapers and other publications, and notifying educational institutions are a few simple strategies. For written advertisements it is not necessary to copy the entire job description, but the ad should include: a job title, important skills and experience needed, positive aspects of the job, some idea of salary and benefits, how to apply, and an application deadline.

Selection

Create a checklist of skills that you would like the employee to have and how you will go about determining whether or not he/she has each of those skills (interviews, written or practical tests, references, applications, etc.). Some farms use multiple methods in order to narrow down a pool of candidates. For example:

- A written application can serve to pinpoint the candidates who have experience in skills needed for the job.
- A practical test such as driving a tractor can further indicate the level of skill.
- Interviews can then help in judging interpersonal skills and more detail about past experience. In an interview, describe the job in detail as well as the philosophy and objectives of the farm. Also, have a list of prepared open-ended questions relating to potential employees past experience that is pertinent to the job description. You may not ask questions regarding race, color, religion, national origin, marital status, number and care of dependents, height, weight, education unrelated to the job, friends or relatives who have previously worked for you, age, arrest records, U.S. citizenship, disabilities, person to notify in case of emergency, sexual orientation, nonbusiness-related references, social clubs and organizations, and military experience in the armed forces of another country.
- A reference from a former employer may then serve to zero in on the final choice.

When making an offer, put it in writing to avoid misunderstanding later on. It is also a good idea to send letters to those who didn't get the job as a courtesy and to avoid bad feelings. The names of applicants that were high up on the list of potential hires should be kept on file because this may save time in the future if another position becomes available.

Employee Retention

Once the hiring process is over, there is still one final consideration which is very important to a successful farming operation: retaining those employees that you took such care in hiring.

The three most important factors in employee retention are: good working conditions, salary, and job security.

Poorly maintained equipment, messy barns, or unfriendly coworkers could all be described as working conditions which would not only be unpleasant for workers, but could also be dangerous. Maintain a safe, friendly workspace and talk to employees about their ideas for improvements. Involving employees in farm decisions, praising employees for things done well and providing training where needed, and in general stressing good communication will improve the working environment and can build employee pride in what they do.

Of course, pride will not pay the bills, so it is important to provide competitive wages and benefits to farm employees. Research the compensation offered by similar employers to get an idea of what qualifies as “competitive” and fair.

Remember that your employees are an essential and influential part of your farm’s success so careful hiring and excellent treatment of employees is in the best interest of everyone involved.

For more information contact Jericho Bicknell at (802) 656-0346 or check out the following websites:

Risk Management Agency Publications: <http://www.rma.usda.gov/pubs/>

USDA Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service Workforce Development & Safety: <http://www.csrees.usda.gov/workforcedevelopmentsafety.cfm>

University of Vermont Extension Agricultural Labor Management: <http://www.uvm.edu/~farmlabr/>

University of California Agricultural Personnel Management Program: <http://apmp.berkeley.edu/>

Labor Management Decisions Newsletter. University of California Agricultural Personnel Management Program: <http://apmp.berkeley.edu/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=352>

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Resources

Hogan, M. *Compensating Farm Employees*, Ohio State University Factsheet HRM-2-97.
<<http://ohioline.osu.edu/hrm-fact/0002.html>>.

Erven, B.L. *Recruiting and Hiring Outstanding Employees*, Department of Agricultural, Environmental and Development Economics, Ohio State University.

Erven, B.L. *The Value and Common Sense of Job Descriptions*, Department of Agricultural, Environmental, and Development Economics, Ohio State University.
<<http://www.aede.osu.edu/resources/docs/pdf/F795FB6C-83AE-49F0-BADA8230BE091C5D.pdf>>