

Risk Management

Human Resource Management: Employee Attraction and Selection Guide

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A recent study by Ernst and Young concluded that recruiting and retaining key personnel is the single largest concern of the 400 fastest growing companies in the country. Is your farm one of those 400? Probably not. Should agricultural managers be concerned about finding and keeping high quality employees? You bet.

Successful managers have learned that an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure when it comes to dealing with employee problems. The risk of hiring a bad employee can be minimized with a sound recruitment and selection process. Recruiting and selecting the right employee for a position is important for the long-term benefit of your farm. This guide covers five steps agricultural managers can use to recruit and select the right employees for their businesses.

Five steps to recruiting and selecting

1. Consider the needs of the position and the business
 2. Build an applicant pool
 3. Evaluate the applicants
 4. Make a selection
 5. Hire and train
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Consider the needs of the position and the business

Too frequently, in the rush to fill a position, the position itself goes unscrutinized. Would you spend thousands of dollars on a tractor without understanding the jobs you expect the tractor to do? Understand the job and you'll recognize the best possible person to fill it.

Ask these questions:

- Does this position require an employee to have good written and verbal communication skills?
- Will there be any responsibilities involving mathematics?
- Does this position require interaction with other farm employees?
- Will this person have to read, drive, lift, see, talk, listen, weld, calculate, stand, instruct, etc.?

Developing a clear understanding of the "ideal" employee for each position is important in attracting such an employee and ensuring that he or she gets the job. This can be accomplished through four steps.

- Determine the *time requirement* of the position—part-time, full-time, seasonal or temporary.
- Do a *job analysis* to describe and record all aspects of the job. You can do this through observation, interviews with other employees, recommendations of experts,



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work diaries, questionnaires and mechanical instruments (stopwatches, counters, films). After the analysis you should know the physical and intellectual requirements the employee must meet, a comprehensive list of tasks to be performed, and where the position fits into the overall organization.

- Develop a *job specification* to group the necessary employee qualifications in terms of knowledge, abilities, skills or licenses. Remember to **take no skills for granted**. If you are hiring someone who may have to mix and apply chemicals, don't be concerned merely with the applicants' physical capabilities and mechanical experience. You should specify that applicants also have adequate reading and mathematical skills. Job specifications might include items such as having a valid driver's license, or knowing how to drive a tractor, weld and do basic mathematics.
- *Job descriptions* have become very popular in the last few years. The job analysis and specifications are combined in the job description to give potential and current employees an accurate perception of the position. Descriptions are typically a page long and include the job title, job summary, key duties, supervisory relationships, and working conditions.

Finally, always 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 role you will expect an employee to play in the "big picture"—managerial responsibilities and long-term commitment to the farm—will help in recruiting and hiring the right person for your operation.

Build an Applicant Pool

Getting qualified and interested applicants is a common concern. 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 with offering bonuses for employees who refer qualified applicants who are hired and work a certain amount of time. Recruitment also can be done through government agencies, schools/universities/colleges, classified ads, private agencies, and the Internet.

Knowing the kind of individual who would best fill a position helps, too. For example, to hire a ranch manager, determine the kinds of magazines a successful manager might subscribe to and the organizations to which he or she might belong. Advertise your position through those channels. Also develop a network of other people in the business, as well as in schools and colleges that have ranch management degree programs, and let them know about your position. Concentrated efforts are frequently much more effective in the long run than a shotgun approach.

By far the best method of recruiting new talent to your business is to make your business the kind of place where talented and hard-working people feel appreciated and valued. This makes it easier to retain good employees and develop a reputation for being a great employer.

Evaluate the Applicants

Evaluating applicants can be difficult for managers to do. It's easy to worry about misjudging applicants—either letting a good employee slip through the cracks or being fooled by someone who is very impressive in the interview process but just isn't the same when it's time to go to work. The following steps may help.

- Go over the job analysis, specification and description, highlighting the skills and qualifications you need to evaluate during the selection process.
- Choose your methods of evaluation. For a complicated position requiring several skills, you will need more than one method. To determine if an applicant has all the necessary tools for a position, it is usually a good idea to run the applicants over some hurdles, or a series of evaluation tools. Often, one hurdle must be "cleared" before an applicant can advance in the selection process.

Some evaluation hurdles include:

- Written applications
- Written tests
- Oral tests
- Interviews
- Practical tests
- References

Written applications gather essential information and gauge the applicant's ability to read and write. They 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, essay. It may be “open book,” allowing the applicant access to the materials available on the job. The applicant may have to examine soil tests or photos of diseased crops and make decisions accordingly. Computer-based tests may also be relevant tools.

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

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

Practical tests require the applicants to perform one or more of the required skills. They 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 applicant's performance on practical tests. These tests also demonstrate the applicant's thought process—did he or she ask questions, prioritize tasks, and stay calm if something went wrong?

References provided by the applicant should include past employers. Keep in mind that some employers may hesitate to provide negative information about former employees for fear of lawsuits. Other employers may give glowing recommendations to unsatisfactory employees they hope will leave. People you know and trust are the only ones 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 evaluation tools. After you have decided which tools you'd like 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. It's always a good idea to ask other employees to critique your evaluation instruments and, perhaps, participate in one or more phases of the evaluation.

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. 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.

Tests. Take the potential employees through the pre-established tests. If an applicant fails to clear one hurdle, he or she may then be eliminated from the pool. It is important to watch the applicant carefully during the practical tests. If you feel the applicant is in danger of harming anyone or anything, the test should be stopped immediately and the candidate should be released from the process.

Well qualified applicants usually like this approach to hiring because it allows them to

interact with other employees and demonstrate their abilities with hands-on tests. This gives them a good feel for the farm and the working environment.

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

Make a Selection

After all applicants have completed the evaluation process, it's 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. Or, you may 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. That is acceptable as long as the employee and employer are on the same page. It is very difficult to maintain a separation between temporary (probationary) and permanent 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.

Hire and Train

Negotiating terms of employment may or may not be necessary for your situation. Handling the hiring process in a fair and legal manner is important.

Training employees is vital in preparing them for success. They will need advice on everything from the informal relationships among co-workers to their own specific job responsibilities. It can be helpful to set up a mentor relationship between a new employee and an existing employee who knows the ropes. This gives the new employee a friend within the business, someone to go to for everything from minor questions (which restaurants in town are good) to major issues (how to deal with another employee or manager). Likewise, the mentor will feel complimented when entrusted with the responsibility of mentoring a new co-worker.

Performance evaluations should be done on a regular basis for everyone who works on your

farm or ranch. This is especially true for new employees. We all know it is best to stop bad habits before they start. Training new employees and reviewing their progress regularly for at least 3 months may prevent future problems. When an employee is new, instruction and guidance will most likely be viewed as helpful. After the employee has been on the job for a while, the same instruction or guidance might be viewed as criticism. Evaluations should start early and continue throughout the employee's career.

The best thing you can do while training is to create the kind of environment in which employees are not afraid to ask questions. Such an environment helps employees and managers work together to make the team the best it can be. Take the time to listen to both questions and ideas. New employees may bring a new approach to old problems. Take advantage of their fresh perspective.

Making It Work

Recruiting and selecting the right people for your business is a challenge, and every situation is unique. If you are innovative, persistent and realistic, and can communicate the strengths of your business and the benefits of the positions you offer, you should be successful in attracting high-quality employees to build careers with your farm.

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