



The Imperfect Search for the Perfect Employee

by Lorne Owen

On the farm, as in any business, finding the right employee is all-important.

An employer who has hired suitable people for the various jobs on the farm has the satisfaction and security of knowing that the business will run smoothly because his employees can be relied on to co-operate in getting a job done, use some initiative when it's required and take some personal pride in their work and the farm operation.

Finding such employees sounds like a tall order and some compromises may be required. But a well-designed hiring procedure will go a long way toward helping an employer find people whose skills and interests best fit the job description.

Far too often people are hired for the wrong reasons; reasons such as "they seemed to be the most like me," "they appeared to be the 'right' sort of person," "they were the first to apply," "I expected them to stay the longest," or "they were willing to work for less." Mismatching employees and jobs is a recipe for frustration for everyone involved. It can also be costly.

In order to reduce chances of hiring the wrong person, many businesses, including farms, are developing better ways of screening applicants.

A well-designed employee screening program will include an interview and one or more pre-employment tests. The amount of testing will vary with the job being filled and could include several approaches. If the candidate is being hired on a casual or part-time basis, a work test could be developed in which the candidate demonstrates equipment-operating or harvesting skills and mechanical ability. For potential full-time employees, a written or oral examination could be prepared to assess knowledge of farming practices.

A work-simulation approach might be used for potential foremen and supervisors, in order to assess their problem-solving and management skills. A work simulation test could include questions such as "how do you identify

powdery mildew or leaf scald in a crop, and what should be done if it's present?"; or "how long do you have to wait after spraying before harvesting or irrigating?" An employer will most likely be able to develop his or her own work tests. There are also commercially available tests that help assess a candidate's personality, allowing one to better match people to jobs.

Testing is time-consuming and sometimes expensive, but it can pay off over the long run. The amount of time and money an employer spends on testing should be related to the economic importance of the job being filled. Every job or job activity has an economic impact on your business. A well-chosen employee may be cause for less wear and tear on equipment or give better and more efficient care to livestock and crops, which will ultimately increase profits. Employees make important decisions ranging from which branch or shoot to prune, or which fruit to pick, to how best to operate and maintain equipment. Some employees are asked to make production and marketing decisions. The potential for positive and negative economic effects increases with the amount of decision-making an employee is responsible for.

Pre-employment testing also helps an employer assess the potential productivity of an applicant. Productivity results from both an individual's willingness to do a job as well as his or her skills. Productivity differences can go unnoticed for quite awhile by a busy employer, so it is important to try to assess them during the interview test. A 1984 U.S. study found that there was as much as a four-fold difference in the productivity of the most productive farm workers and the least productive workers.

Although an applicant's enthusiasm for a job is likely at a peak during a test, those workers who only do half as well as others when trying their best under test conditions are unlikely, no matter what the motivation, to excel when it comes to actually doing the job. A significant relationship between the results of work

tests and on-the-job performance was found in a recent study of four U.S. farms.

If differences in a worker's productivity are determined by testing, the employer is then in a position to decide on different pay schedules for different employees. A contract or piecework rather than hourly wages might be more suitable for slower or less-experienced workers, or appropriate training might be in order.

Another benefit of pre-employment testing is that the number of candidates to screen will likely be reduced. When candidates find they are faced with a test, some will decide not to pursue the position any further. Testing, especially a work test, also provides the applicant with a better idea of what the job involves. After participating in a work test, an applicant may realize that he or she is not qualified for the job, or that the job does not meet emotional, social or economic needs.

Before any recruiting, interviewing or testing takes place, an employer needs to prepare a brief, accurate job description. Writing a job description will help determine which skills are essential to the job and which are only desirable. A job description will help you make up interview questions and work tests. A job description is also essential when it comes time to evaluate employee performance and make training and promotion decisions.

No one — not even family members — should be hired without an interview. An application provides an opportunity to compare candidates and get opinions from family members and current employees on which applicant to choose.

One can then use the interview and test results to assist in making a final hiring decision, as well as making decisions on appropriate training, pay and supervision activities.

By developing and following a well-designed employee selection process managers will be better prepared to screen and select the employees they'll need for their businesses to grow and compete.

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