

**RECRUITING AND KEEPING  
HIRED FARM WORKERS**

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## RECRUITING AND KEEPING HIRED FARM WORKERS

by

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### Introduction

Successful farm managers must be competent in many management areas. One of these is labor management. This area of management is not only becoming increasingly important, but also is somewhat unique among management tasks. This uniqueness is due to the fact that it involves getting things done through and with people. When the farm operator can no longer do everything himself, his success depends in part on others. Consequently, labor management generally grows in importance as farms become larger and more complex.

Good labor management involves effective utilization of all labor, but here we are concerned only with recruiting and keeping hired farm workers. However, many of the points discussed have implications for unpaid family labor.

### Recruitment Success -- More Than Luck

Labor recruitment success is finding and hiring the "right person" for a position, rather than simply filling a position. Too often there is an assumption that luck is the key element in recruitment success. Consequently, a labor manager may devote little time to recruitment. The following excerpt from a letter received from an Ohio agricultural employer illustrates this point:

I am writing to relate one example of our level of labor management. I think it is typical of agriculture in general. Just two years ago we spent more than one man week selecting a \$10,000 truck and body. We spent almost no time at all selecting or training a driver for this truck even though the driver's wages are the largest single cost of operating the truck. In addition, the driver could cause an accident resulting in a financial loss many times greater than the cost of the truck.

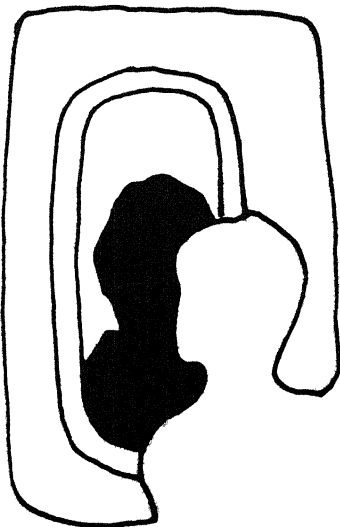
Hiring a regular farm worker should be considered a major decision, ranking in importance with decisions concerning the purchase of machinery, breeding livestock, or land, or the choice of crop enterprises. This suggests that a farm manager should plan his labor recruitment strategy carefully, following some specific recruitment guidelines rather than simply "hoping for the best."

#### Recruitment Guidelines

The following guidelines are intended to assist a farm labor manager in analyzing his past recruitment efforts and developing future recruitment plans:

1. Know Yourself.
2. Know Your Business.
3. Know the Strengths and Weaknesses Associated with the Position You are Filling.
4. Think in Terms of Selling an Opportunity to a Capable Person Who Has Alternatives for Employment.

#### Know Yourself



Understanding oneself can be an important part of labor recruitment. The personal characteristics of an employer directly influence his success in recruiting and keeping key employees. For labor management purposes, the objective of self-analysis is better understanding of how one is viewed by potential and existing employees.

Self-analysis is difficult and seldom completely accurate. Nevertheless, a labor manager's reactions

to the following 10 statements should provide some assistance in self-analysis.

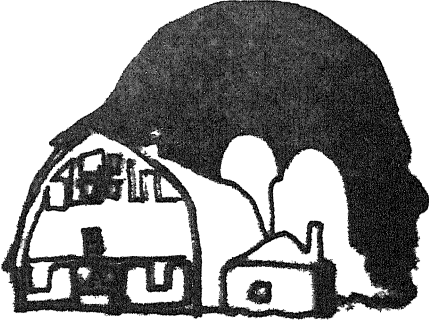
Agree	Disagree	
A	D	1. I am the kind of person I would like as a "boss."
A	D	2. I do not like to be thought of as the "boss."
A	D	3. I am highly respected by my employees.
A	D	4. I like to talk with other people.
A	D	5. I am a good teacher.
A	D	6. I am a good listener.
A	D	7. I have little trouble being understood by others.
A	D	8. I trust my employees.
A	D	9. I believe most of my employees like having some responsibility.
A	D	10. I believe farm workers need an occasional pat on the back.

Statements with which a labor manager disagrees may suggest areas for additional consideration. Analyzing and possibly altering the personal characteristics associated with these items could be helpful.

Understanding of his own strengths and weaknesses may also lead to changes in what the labor manager considers desirable and undesirable characteristics in potential employees.

Even if a labor manager can "agree" with all 10 statements, total success in recruiting and labor management is not guaranteed. No labor manager is likely to avoid or overcome all problems associated with recruiting and hiring new employees. Nevertheless, better understanding of oneself should improve recruiting effectiveness.

Know Your Business



An understanding of the objectives of the farm business and its current and long run problems will help in identifying desirable characteristics for a new employee. It will also help in identifying those specific things expected to be accomplished through hired farm workers. For example, if an objective is to increase average litter size through better management practices, it may be desirable to look for a person with strengths in this area or at least a willingness and desire to master the needed skills. Clearly, the farm manager has the responsibility for the objectives of the business and the problems being faced. These responsibilities cannot be delegated to a hired farm worker. However, it is probably helpful to have one or more key employees with interests and skills which complement those of the manager.

Know the Advantages and Disadvantages Associated with the Position

There are both advantages and disadvantages associated with farm employment. Neither all the advantages nor all the disadvantages are associated with a particular farm job. However, the list should suggest to the farm labor recruiter some of the attitudes likely to be encountered as a farm position is discussed with potential employees.

Typical Advantages of Farm Employment

1. Work with plants and animals.
2. Work varies during the year.
3. Both indoor and outdoor work are included.
4. Sense of accomplishment through observing progress of farm.

5. Little chance of unemployment.
6. Little or no time spent commuting to work.
7. Easy to find a different farm job.

#### Typical Disadvantages of Farm Employment

1. Low income relative to nonfarm employment.
2. Emphasis on fringe benefits rather than dollar income.
3. Different benefits than nonfarm workers receive.
4. Length of work day and work week.
5. Greater likelihood of injurious accidents.
6. Difficult to advance without changing jobs.
7. Low prestige.
8. Social isolation.
9. Farmers generally not perceived as good labor managers.

Both labor recruitment and good labor management involve trying to overcome as many of these disadvantages as is economically feasible while capitalizing on the advantages. For example, one may be able to use imaginative job titles to overcome the low prestige problem.

#### Sell an Opportunity

A farm employer's success in labor recruitment is likely to be influenced by his attitude toward recruitment and the enthusiasm with which he approaches it. It will be helpful to think in terms of selling an opportunity to a capable person who has alternatives for employment. Advertising the position so that potential employees are made aware of the opportunity being offered is essential to having a broad range of candidates from which to choose. After a preliminary review of the applicants, the labor manager should be able to select two or three for more detailed consideration.

If possible, each of the finalists for a position should be given a tour of the farm so that the farm manager has the opportunity to demonstrate his enthusiasm and pride in the operation. This will also provide an excellent opportunity to become better acquainted with the applicant, his interests, his personality, and other personal attributes which may be important. The objective of this visit should be to make the applicant want to become part of the operation. Even if the person is not offered the position, his positive impression of the farm business is likely to generate good publicity among other potential employees.

If a position is offered, it is desirable to have a written job description including an explanation of hours, wages, and fringe benefits to share with the applicant. A clear understanding of the conditions of employment may reduce later misunderstandings.

#### Keeping Labor

A second major concern of labor management is reducing labor turnover -- keeping good hired labor. Following careful recruitment and training, an employee may well become an important part of a farm business. Replacing such an employee may be difficult and costly.

**CCC**

It may be helpful to think of the labor turnover problem in terms of three C's: Create  
Communicate  
Compensate

#### Create

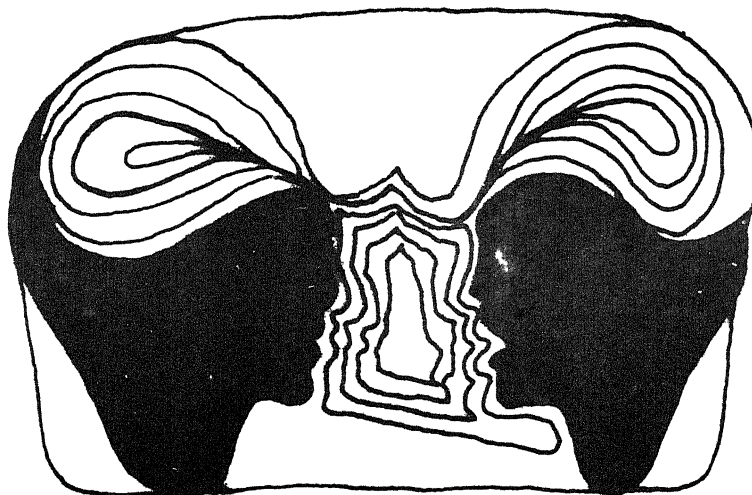
Good labor managers are creative in that they are regularly challenged to find new ways to keep employees motivated and interested in their work. Creating growth and progress opportunities within the farm business is difficult in most situations because of the relatively small number of employees and the lack of variation in job responsibilities within the farm. Therefore, a farm labor



manager generally must give special attention to creating growth opportunities. Among the possibilities are increased involvement in extension meetings and other information gathering activities, increased decision making responsibility, some responsibility for training new employees and supervising fellow employees, more freedom to work without close or daily supervision, some choice of working hours, and part ownership.

Another aspect of the creative challenge facing a farm labor employer is development of desirable working conditions. The equipment, machinery, and buildings on the farm directly influence working conditions. Substituting equipment and machinery for labor to make the job less physically demanding may help make a job more attractive. Careful training programs to help an employee better understand his job responsibilities also are important in creating desirable working conditions.

Communicate



Because labor management involves getting things done through people, the labor manager must communicate with his employees. The effectiveness of the communication will directly influence labor management success and labor turnover. A labor manager's communication with employees involves much more than just "telling them" what he thinks they need to know. Furthermore, communica-

tion is not limited to verbal exchanges between two or more people. Communication may occur through writing, pictures, charts, and posters. Communication may also be silent, not involving verbal or written actions. A smile, frown, handshake, shrug, grunt, nod, gesture and even silence are also means of communicating.

Not all communication is effective. Effective communication involves being understood and getting desired results. Part of a labor manager's communication success involves being sensitive to communication barriers. This sensitivity may involve using words employees understand, encouraging them to ask questions, and avoiding harsh criticism of those who do not understand.

Providing instructions on what to do and how to do it is the major reason for a labor manager communicating with employees. However, a farm labor manager may be able to accomplish several additional things through effective communication. Some possibilities are:

1. Identification of employee concerns and problems.
2. Praise of high quality performance by employees.
3. Constructive criticism of low quality performance by employees.
4. Employees feeling more personally involved in the successes and failures of the farm business.
5. Obtaining employee insights and suggestions for changes or improvements on the farm.

### Compensate

Worker compensation or payment may be divided into two parts: dollars and benefits. Farm workers are generally paid substantially less than nonfarm workers with comparable skills and job responsibilities. However, the problems associated with compensation are not limited to increasing dollar incomes of farm workers. In fact, employers who depend solely on pay increases to keep key employees are likely to be disappointed in the results. Clearly, a worker's

income needs to be analyzed in terms of his alternatives. However, more than the dollar amounts need to be considered in this evaluation. An employee is likely to be particularly sensitive to the benefits he is receiving in his farm job, compared to the benefits he would be receiving in a nonfarm job open to him. Examples of such benefits are paid vacation, sick leave, overtime pay, and life and health insurance.

It is important to view benefits from the employee standpoint as well as the employer standpoint. For example, a farm employer providing a house to an employee may view the benefit as a way of getting some return from a house that could not otherwise be rented. However, an employee may view the benefit as a negative characteristic of the job because his family is living in an undesirable house.

#### Summary

Labor management has become an essential part of most growing farm businesses. This pamphlet is concerned with two areas of labor management: recruitment and employee turnover. Labor recruitment recommendations include the labor manager having knowledge about himself, his business, and the strengths and weaknesses associated with a position. Also desirable are a positive attitude toward the recruitment function and the willingness to think in terms of selling an opportunity to a capable person who has alternatives for employment. It may be helpful to a labor manager to approach the labor turnover problem in terms of three C's: create, communicate, and compensate. Attention to each of these should not only reduce labor turnover but also have a positive influence on worker motivation and labor productivity.