

Finding and Keeping the Right Employees: Ideas to Bait the Hook

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The right employees bring good fortune. However, finding the right just doesn't happen right out of the blue. Having capable, eager and motivated people come a-knocking on your door, asking to do the kind of work you need done, happens in fairy tales. In real life, managing people is a big challenge that eats up precious time and can cause frustration. Not selecting the best candidate, or losing an enthusiastic worker, can signal that it's time to examine your human resource approach.

Tom Maloney, senior Extension associate in the Department of Applied Economics and Management at Cornell University, has spent the last 15 years of his career focusing on labor issues and policy. He's been visiting with farmers over the past three years at New England dairy seminars. Hiring, managing and succeeding with farm employees are his specialties.

"You need help, and you know the kind of person you wish you could find," Maloney begins his talk at the Maine Dairy Seminar held in Augusta. He asks the audience what counts. "A person who wants to work around animals," someone says. "Reliable—someone who will show up on time," is mentioned. Others say, "mechanical ability, can work independently, someone I can trust." Getting the person you want is within reach, Maloney says.

So, where to begin? Finding the right person starts by getting a handle on the job. The first step is defining what you expect to have done. What exactly will you assign the new person to do? What are the specific tasks, and when must they be done? Must they be done in a certain way or at a certain time? Thinking through details makes it easier to determine what talents and skills are needed for both the employer and employee to succeed.

Farm-owner operators and family manage all kinds of jobs every day. They somehow learn them over time. But expectations must be realistic for a new hire on the farm. A person who is happily mucking out stalls may not efficiently pull reports out of the database or serve customers who drop by the farm stand. Employees who are happy with what they are doing and are satisfied with their work environment are generally more productive.

The first step in a systematic approach to successful human resource management is recruitment, Maloney says. "You want to develop the broadest pool of potential job candidates." He encourages using "traditional" sources like government job services agencies, farm internship programs, community bulletin board postings and advertisement in local and agricultural publications. However, he says, the best source is word-of-mouth. "Some of the best leads come from current employees. They know what the job is and have a vested interest in making sure their coworkers will be good," he explains. "Offer a bonus if the new person stays six months. A \$50 or \$200 bonus can make the grapevine or e-mail buzz!"

"Don't be afraid to be creative by exploring "non-traditional" sources like homemakers, retirees, teachers with summers off. Don't narrow the field and exclude people who might perform these very well and be happy doing it," Maloney says. Farms offer work variety, flexible hours and the chance to work outside with animals. These are great benefits, which some people prefer over wages. "Not everybody wants to fry hamburgers for McDonald's, even though they might get \$7 an hour. Farms should capitalize on their unique setting and mix of opportunities."

The next step in the process is writing a "help

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wanted” ad that sells the position. There are many positive attributes that may draw people into your prospective applicant pool. Think of everyday “luxuries” your farm offers and draft some help wanted ads:

“Looking for fresh air and exercise? Need variety and a challenge? Family business offers good working conditions, flexible hours, done by 4 p.m.”

Choosing the best applicant out of those you interview can be tricky. Be prepared and keep an open mind, Maloney says. He suggests developing a short list of questions and asking all the questions each time, so the interviewer has a consistent means of comparing and evaluating candidates’ responses. Asking what people like to do in their free time is one way to get at what tasks the person may excel at. Does the person prefer to work independently or with others? If your crew works as a team, it’s important to select for this personality trait.

One of the hardest areas in managing employees is keeping the right ones and getting rid of the others. The U.S. Department of Labor reports that respect—not money, nor benefits, but respect—is the number one thing employees say they want first and foremost. Workers need to know how important the boss thinks their roles are within the total scheme of the operation. An open and friendly atmosphere along with positive acknowledgement for good work will do wonders. What can be easier than thanking people when they make special contributions, like stay late, work lunch, or go the extra mile when they could have gotten by easier? Don’t wait; make the acknowledgement immediately. “Positive reinforcement has to be earned. You cannot just give it away. Giving superfluous compliments is not respect,” Maloney says. “If the employee does something you did not like, tell him or her as quickly as you can. On the other hand, if he or she performs exceptionally well, tell that employee and everybody else too!”

“Your goal is to build loyalty and an atmosphere of mutual respect,” Maloney says, adding that the best way to accomplish this is keeping an open, friendly

attitude. “An employee is more apt to ask questions before she/he acts on his own, when the boss’ attitude encourages it,” Maloney advises.

Assigning a title to positions is an easy way to express the importance of the job and regard for how this role fits into the larger farm. The title a person carries tells the employee and others what you think of him. The title should refer to the main job responsibility.

Feedback is critical. Giving feedback becomes easier when performance is rated on a regular basis, such as quarterly or semiannually. Using just three ratings—excellent, okay, unsatisfactory—will communicate your regard for the person’s performance. Evaluate the things that matter—such as timeliness, avoiding waste, safety, job skill, care of equipment, willingness, honesty, pride, use of time, reliability. Be candid. Use the time to go over problem issues and give praise, stressing performance rather than personal characteristics. Keeping dated notes provides documentation for future reference.

Finally, protect the investment you have made by developing your good workers who your needs. “No one is in business just to make friends or because they like to work,” Maloney says. Employees must feel appreciated and have opportunity to progress. If the family farm cannot increase wages and benefits or offer advancement, the best workers may move on to greener pastures, unless they know that you want them to stay. Instead of a raise, the employer and worker might discuss together what else could be done to replace money. Sometimes, options like flex time, job sharing, assignment of new tasks, supervising or learning something new is reward enough. Keeping good workers satisfied and at peak performance is important. Otherwise, you may be filling vacancies again and starting all over. The goal is to keep good workers who enjoy performing in a friendly and open working environment and who know their roles are important within the whole operation. Feeling an important part of an organization contributes to everyone’s success.

