

# Hiring High Quality Dairy Farm Workers

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Dairy managers face a major challenge in finding and keeping quality employees. Finding the quality employees is absolutely necessary if profitability, growth and excellence goals are to be reached. Finding employees can become an urgent or even a critical problem threatening the future of the business.

No simple or even complex recipe guarantees hiring success. Luck is not the answer. The employer who seems lucky in always finding high quality people rarely is in fact lucky. Instead, such producers are depending on carefully made plans and a reputation as an excellent employer that has been patiently built. The answer lies in each employer developing a plan for filling positions.

The following eight-step process for filling a position can be the foundation for a successful hiring plan.

## Steps for Filling a Position

1. Determine the labor needs that the new employee is expected to address
2. Develop a current job description based on the needs
3. Build a pool of applicants
4. Review applications and select those to be interviewed
5. Interview
6. Check references
7. Make a selection
8. Hire

### *Step 1 - Determine the Labor Needs that the New Employee is Expected to Address*

What the business needs, rather than what an applicant likes to do, should guide the hiring process. An understanding of the goals for the dairy and its current and long-run constraints to progress will help in identifying desirable characteristics for employees. Goals and performance standards for areas with which the employee will have direct contact should be specifically addressed. This should happen before commencing the search for a new employee or starting a training program. This helps identify the specifics expected to be accomplished through the new hires.

Skipping this step and "hiring the first person in the driveway" is chancy. It means that a fit between what the dairy needs and what the new employee brings to the job is left to chance.

Sometimes a farm manager is desperate for an

employee. Taking time to think about the farm's needs seems unrealistic. The only way the farm manager can assure time for this step is to have backup labor already available and trained. The backup labor helps the farm through tight periods without forcing a hiring decision out of desperation.

### *Step 2 - Develop a Current Job Description Based on the Needs Identified in Step 1*

Job descriptions help both the employer and employees by answering three questions: What does the jobholder do? How is it done? Under what conditions is it done? The job description has at least four parts:

1. Job title
2. A brief one or two sentence summary of the job
3. A listing of the major tasks involved in the job, summarized under three to seven general headings, and
4. A listing of the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to do the job.

Job descriptions are typically one page long. The brevity requires a terse, direct writing style. Simple words with single meanings should be used. Action verbs in the present tense should be used in defining the job duties, e.g., cares for newborn calves, operates farm machinery including tractors and trucks, enters data in computer, completes a performance evaluation at least annually for each employee supervised. The specifics of the job should be clear from the job description. The job title, job summary and description of duties should be completely consistent. To illustrate, the job title of herd manager is inconsistent with a list of job duties that includes only routine work tasks such as cleaning, feeding, moving, loading and repairing.

### *Step 3 - Build a Pool of Applicants*

Although there are many methods of getting job applicants, word-of-mouth and help wanted ads are likely to generate the most applicants. Word-of-mouth involves current employees, customers, neighbors, agribusiness contacts, veterinarians and others who come in contact with potential employees. Word of mouth is fast and low cost. However, it limits the scope of the job search because qualified applicants may not hear about the position. The farm's reputation as an outstanding place to work is a powerful asset for generating a pool of applicants.

Help-wanted ads can be placed in newspapers and magazines known to be read by potential employees. Help-wanted ads have the potential of expanding the applicant pool beyond the local community.

The employer should be ready for telephone calls or visits from potential applicants. Each applicant should be asked to fill out an application form. Taking time to develop an application form or modify one used previously forces identification of important characteristics to look for in applicants.

#### *Step 4 - Review Applications and Select Those to be Interviewed*

Some applicants will be excluded from further consideration based on the application form. A pre-interview can also be used to help identify applicants to be invited for a formal interview. Having interested people visit the farm to fill out an application form can provide opportunity for a few general questions about experience and interest in the job.

#### *Step 5 - Interview*

The following questions need to be addressed in preparation for interviewing:

1. Who will be on the interview team?
2. What training will be provided for first-time interviewers?
3. What questions will be asked in the interview?
4. How will the interview time be allotted?

Preparing a list of questions before the interview is critical to interview success. Avoid questions that can be answered yes or no. Use open-ended questions that encourage applicants to explain experiences, characteristics and ideas in their own words. The intent is to discover how the applicant has handled real-world situations rather than what they promise to do in the future. So that applicants can be compared on the same criteria, the basic list of questions asked should be the same for each applicant.

Ask only about those things that are unquestionably related to the job and any applicant's ability to do the job.

Once you have selected the interviewing team and planned the interview, you are ready to interview the people selected in Step 4. A 30-minute interview can be divided into the following nine steps:

1. Relax the applicant and build rapport. (2-3 minutes)
2. Give the applicant a copy of the job description and describe the job in considerable detail. (3-5 minutes)
3. Determine the accuracy of the information on the application form. (4-7 minutes)
4. Ask a series of open-ended questions previously prepared. (10-15 minutes)

5. Encourage the applicant to ask questions. (2-5 minutes)
6. Summarize your farm's mission, objectives, and business philosophy. (2-4 minutes)
7. Summarize the opportunities provided to the person in the position. (2-4 minutes)
8. Encourage the applicant to ask questions. (2-10 minutes)
9. Close with information about plans for making a decision. (2-4 minutes)

Interviewing is difficult. Knowing how to do it well makes it enjoyable. Some dos and don'ts can serve as reminders on how to improve your interviewing skills.

#### Do:

1. Make sure the applicant does most of the talking.
2. Make the interview fun for you and the applicant.
3. Listen!!!
4. Be attentive.
5. Concentrate on the interview and what is being said.
6. Show enthusiasm throughout the interview.
7. "Read" non-verbal messages.
8. Show appreciation for the person being interested in the position.
9. Show pride in your business and the dairy industry.
10. Stay in control of the interview.

#### Don't:

1. Project the answer you want from the applicant, e.g., "You do like cows don't you."
2. Cut an interview short because the first 10 minutes did not go well.
3. Let your note taking during the interview detract from the "flow" of the interview.
4. Read questions to the applicant.
5. Let your facial expressions and other non-verbal responses show your dissatisfaction with the applicant's answers.
6. Add a series of follow-up questions to explore "interesting" side issues.
7. Allow an aggressive applicant to ignore your questions and talk about things not on your agenda.

#### *Step 6 - Check References*

References can add to the information gathered in application forms and interviews. Personal visits or telephone conversations will be more productive than asking for written comments. Getting references from your personal acquaintances or from people well known in dairy circles will be more productive than asking

strangers. Asking about the most important contribution the employee has made is likely to be more helpful than asking if the reference knows of any reason you should not hire the person. A reference's tone of voice may communicate more than the words being said.

Some references have reason to give less than candid information, e.g., praising a problem employee in hopes that another employer will hire away the person. On the other hand, some employers may hint at problems in hopes of preventing a job offer being made to an outstanding employee.

### *Step 7 - Make a Selection*

Strive to be as objective as possible, given the job description; knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to do the job; and the information available concerning each applicant. If no satisfactory applicant is found, start the process over rather than deciding to take a chance on a doubtful applicant.

Selection biases can easily creep into the process. Five potentially important selection biases are:

1. **Stereotyping:** Attributing certain characteristics to a particular group of people. "People who grew up on farms are hard workers."
2. **Halo effect:** Regarding highly an individual who has characteristics you particularly like. "A person, like me, who drives a Chevy, loves country music and is a Braves fan will be a good employee."
3. **First Impressions:** Judging prematurely based on appearance, handshake or voice. "He has a good firm handshake, a friendly smile, no earrings, and short hair. He will be a good employee."
4. **Contrast:** Measuring against the last person interviewed. "After that last person we interviewed, I had begun to think we would never find a good person."
5. **Staleness:** Discounting those interviewed early and favoring a person interviewed just before the selection is made.

### *Step 8 - Hire a Person*

Make an oral offer in person or by telephone to your first choice followed by a written offer that summarizes the key conditions of employment. In making the offer, emphasize that the applicant is the first choice among several qualified people. Show enthusiasm over the hope that this person will soon be joining your dairy.

The written employment agreement can be a letter of explanation or a form with blanks filled in as appropriate. Whatever the form, the agreement should include a description of the job, a statement that the employment is "at will," and explanation of compensation, benefits, work schedules and any other important details.

### **Summary**

"This is all nice but... I don't have enough time to follow all these steps."

"This is all nice but... I don't know how to do all these things you say are necessary."

"This is all nice but... I only need the Ford of hiring, not the Mercedes you have described."

"This is all nice but... I don't know any dairy that pays this much attention to filling a position."

The recipe for dairy success is complex. Animals, equipment, financing, land and buildings matter a great deal. People also matter. To a great extent, managers reach their goals through people. Getting things done through people requires competent employees. Mediocrity in filling positions can make a huge difference over time. To have competent employees, people who have the potential of being competent need to be hired. The question is: Do I maximize my chances of hiring the "right" people or do I leave my success to chance? Each farm employer answers this question directly or indirectly and then lives with the answer.