

Attracting High Quality Employees

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■ Take Home Messages

- ▶ Hiring great employees requires year round attention. It must be a priority, not just something done when there is an open position.
- ▶ Becoming a preferred employer – a business where job seekers want to work – is the employment equivalent of having a great image of the business' product or service.
- ▶ A preferred employer provides a great work environment and promotes their farm business to the community including potential job applicants.
- ▶ Preparation for recruitment includes writing a job description, pinpointing the competencies required to succeed in the position and identify high potential labor pools.
- ▶ Recruitment is marketing – the farm business and the open position.
- ▶ Recruitment materials should be carefully written highlighting positive attributes of the farm/position and the competencies required to succeed in the position.
- ▶ Selection involves choosing from the pool of candidates the individual or individuals who best match the competencies needed to succeed in the position.
- ▶ The selection process is a series of steps; the heart of selection is the interview.
- ▶ Keep three key interviewing issues in mind: a) preparation by the farm manager for the interview is crucial, b) thoughtful, structured interview questions are necessary, and c) be aware of legality issues when interviewing.

■ Hiring Excellent Employees Requires Planning

“I can't find good help!”

This is an exclamation I hear all too often from dairy farm and other managers. I recognize that hiring is often both difficult and frustrating. Before talking directly about hiring, let's introduce a contrast I thought of recently.

In the thirty years I have worked with dairy farmers, I have never heard a dairy farmer exclaim: "I can't produce milk!" It certainly is not because producing milk is easy; you and I recognize the difficulties. Then why? Dairy farmers produce milk because it is their job; they work every day in planning and producing milk.

Similarly, hiring is an integral part of your position as dairy farm owner/leader/manager. Those who succeed at hiring great employees have a hiring plan. They work at it year round! Successful hiring also makes producing milk easier. In this paper we outline a hiring plan – preparation, recruitment, selection – and illustrate its application to hiring a milker.

■ **Be a Preferred Employer**

Think about how your industry – the dairy industry – works to increase consumption of milk and dairy products. Your industry advertises! The effectiveness of this advertising, however, is dependent upon a positive image/reputation of milk and dairy products. A good product or service is infinitely easier to market than a crummy one!

You know what is coming now! What is the image of your farm and the dairy industry as a place to work? Just like advertising a product or service, hiring is infinitely easier with a great image/reputation as a place to work. We call an employer with a positive image as a place to work a preferred employer.

Believe it or not, there are businesses -- small and large, with professional employees and with low paying jobs – including farms THAT DO NOT HAVE TO RECRUIT because then have a waiting list of applicants. They are a preferred employer. Who is the preferred employer in your community? How did they become a preferred employer?

Let me share a couple examples:

- A manager of several agricultural businesses including a dairy heifer raising enterprise was always a speaker in the college human resource course I taught. His business was a preferred employer. He would often sheepishly tell the story of a young man who came to his business seeking employment. After a few minutes of questioning, he realized to his amazement that this young man had **MOVED MORE THAN 50 MILES WITH THE SOLE PURPOSE OF WORKING AT HIS BUSINESS.**

- ▶ Another business – a dairy farm -- is the preferred employer for high school students at three local schools. They have mastered the challenge of providing the student employees flexibility AND knowing that they will show up when assigned to work. They accomplish this challenge by providing opportunities for the students to indicate work preference but then requiring that student employees honor the resulting schedule. IT WORKS!

So how does a dairy farm business become a preferred employer? First, you must have a good product – you must provide a great place to work. Contrary to general thinking, this does not mean excessively high compensation or just being nice to employees. It does mean that you have to be competitive in compensation. Most importantly, you must be a great employer:

- ▶ treat employees with respect
- ▶ be relentlessly FAIR to employees
- ▶ provide clear expectations and great feedback
- ▶ provide opportunities to grow and advance
- ▶ develop a team atmosphere that is attractive to join

Just as the dairy industry promotes milk and dairy products, you have to promote your farm as great place to work. A key place to start in promoting your farm as a place to work is to the workforce of the business and the trusted advisors/consultants/input providers of the farm business. Again, here are some ideas:

- ▶ My wife and I exercise at the St. Paul Gym on the University of Minnesota campus. There is an information board just inside the door. Yesterday the names and pictures of every staff member had been posted on this board. I was able to learn the names of a couple employees I interact with. Seeing the pictures personalized the staff for me and, I am sure, provided some recognition for them. Why not post individual or a group picture of your staff in a prominent place in the barn, milking center or farm office.
- ▶ Develop a recognition program where employees' accomplishments at the farm or in their personal life are highlighted to the workforce, trusted advisors and visitors to the farm. The recognition should be for specific accomplishments – not the overused employee of the month type programs.

I recognize that starting and especially continuing programs like these take time and energy. Keeping a program like this in place will only happen if you make it a priority. Making it a priority can only come from recognition that being a preferred employer is an excellent opportunity for your farm

business!!!

■ A Recruitment Plan and Recruiting

On farms and other small businesses, hiring is an infrequent occurrence. It is, however, a critical occurrence when it is necessary. The choices made go a long way to determine the level of stress owners will face and the success of the farm.

Good procedures for choosing equipment and supplies and developing a recruitment plan have more similarities than you might think. Consider the purchase of a new tractor. You begin by specifying what you need – horsepower, features, etc. – given the tractors you already have and the characteristics of your farm. You then collect information and compile, formally or informally, a list of possible makes and models that you might purchase. Finally you collect detailed information including cost and select a tractor for purchase.

The hiring of the best people utilizes a similar procedure with two major differences. First, the choices are more important as there are greater productivity differences among people than among different brands and models of equipment and inputs. Second, each manager is essentially on his or her own when hiring employees.

Unfortunately, most hiring procedures are less detailed and less reliable than the procedures used to purchase new equipment. What then is included in a reliable hiring procedure?

Begin by identifying what you are looking for. We have all heard the adage: "If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there." The direct recruiting analogy of: "If you don't know what you are looking for, any candidate will meet the job requirements" is a bit strong. However, the probability of successfully choosing the correct candidate – including especially the difficult decision to start the process over because no candidate fits the position – is greatly enhanced by knowing exactly what you are looking for. Knowing what you are looking for should be expressed in two forms:

- ▶ Prepare a job description including a) the job title, b) a summary of the position including who supervises the position, c) typical duties and responsibilities including supervisory and management expectations if any, and d) the knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes required to succeed in the position.
- ▶ From the job description, especially the final item, carefully identify and articulate the three to five most important "competencies" to succeed in

the position. A formal definition of competencies is “The combination of observable and measurable skills, knowledge, experience, performance behaviors, and personal attributes that contribute to enhanced employee performance and personal success.” Selection of three to five competencies most critical to success in the position will greatly assist you in recruitment and later in selection.

The following is an example competencies set for a milker position:

- ▶ Successful experience doing repetitive tasks
- ▶ Positive work attitude
- ▶ Reliability
- ▶ Gentle

Another key to a recruitment plan is identifying the labor pools that are most likely to contain excellent candidates for your positions. Effective recruiting targets specific, identified labor pools rather than the general labor market. Some examples:

- ▶ McDonalds for years has been a master at targeting the pool of part time high school students. As that pool has become smaller, they are also targeting senior citizens.
- ▶ Many farms targets high school juniors and seniors who in many cases work at the farm through college. A farm I know has an even more select pool; they send a letter to all high school juniors and seniors elected to the honor society.
- ▶ Many industries in the US have targeted the immigrant labor pool; however, like McDonald’s student pool, this pool is shrinking in many areas of the country. Examples in Canada are less common but do exist using specific programs to attract students or workers from other countries.

No one pool fits all farms. The challenge for you is to develop a recruitment plan complete with the “right” labor pools and then earn and create an image as a preferred employer within that pool.

Is this easy? The answer is NO in capital letters. Remember, however, if it were easy, everyone could do it. An excellent RECRUITMENT PLAN is a great first step to success as a farm manager!!!

Only now are we ready to begin recruiting. The goal of actual recruiting is to reach and persuade a large number of qualified candidates to apply for the position we have open. When a company advertises – let’s use Tim Hortons – they promote the positive attributes of their donuts and other offerings, their

convenience, their quality ingredients with the objective that you – the potential customer – purchase from them.

Similarly, in recruiting we promote the positive attributes of our farm and the open position. In recruiting we additionally provide more detailed information about what will enable a potential candidate to succeed in the position – the competencies.

Let's first discuss the positive attributes. These are sadly lacking in most recruitment materials I read. Just today I was teaching a seminar for managers. They had a very difficult time moving past their concern that they could not offer a competitive wage. Compensation is important but not nearly as important as most think. Did you become a farmer for the money? Take the time to brainstorm positives.

Recruitment is defined as the process of attracting individuals on a timely basis, in sufficient numbers, and with appropriate qualifications to apply for a job. Note that the focus in this definition is on attracting a pool of applicants – not just one qualified applicant. This focus on **the one candidate** instead of **a pool** is the MOST common mistake made by managers. The goal of recruiting is to attract a quality pool from which there is a high probability of hiring a great candidate. Without a pool of candidates the probability of hiring a great candidate is very low.

Your recruitment plan to reach great candidates AND entice them to apply for your position can include informal word of mouth communications, want ads, job announcements, internet job announcements and formal job services. The following want ad for a milker position – same ideas could be used in other recruitment forms – incorporates the competencies defined above for this position:

EXCELLENCE, TRAINING, TEAM ATMOSPHERE!!!! We are seeking reliable, gentle workers to milk our prized herd of dairy cows. Top of the Hill Dairy Farm is a progressive family business producing wholesome, nutritious milk for families like yours. We are committed to producing superior quality milk for consumers and to providing outstanding job satisfaction for our employees. The new employees will be responsible for all tasks required to milk our herd of cows in a timely and professional manner. The position requires gentleness with the animals and precision in the milking process. We provide initial training and continuing training. Weekday and weekend regular hours are available. Are you looking for a change? Apply to help serve consumers like you!! Applications available at:

The Recruitment Worksheet on the following page can be used to write recruiting material like the above. With this information, great marketing materials can be developed using the following seven steps:

- ▶ Lead with a positive statement or job characteristic that attracts attention
- ▶ Give the job title
- ▶ Say something positive about the business
- ▶ Describe the job
- ▶ Explain qualifications necessary for success in the position
- ▶ Provide information on wages and benefits, as appropriate
- ▶ Say how to apply for the job.

Recruitment Worksheet

List words and phrases that describe the positive attributes of this farm or other business:

List words and phrases that describe the positive attributes of this position:

Describe the position:

What are the qualifications (competencies) required for success in the position:

What are great candidates for this position doing now (be creative):

How should candidates apply for the job:

■ Selection and the Interview

Selection involves choosing from the pool of candidates the individual or individuals who best match the competencies needed to succeed in the position. Remember that you are a) determining the “fit” of this candidate for the position **AND** b) promoting the position and your farm so the candidate is likely to accept should you decide to offer him/her the position. I often say “selection is like dating.” Either party can end the process at any time.

The selection process involves many steps, typically the following:

- ▶ Review of resumes and/or application forms.
- ▶ One or more employment interviews.
- ▶ Testing, assessments and simulations.
- ▶ Reference checks and recommendations.
- ▶ Hiring.

The heart of selection is the interview. Keep three key interviewing issues in mind:

- ▶ Preparation by the farm manager for the interview is crucial.
- ▶ Thoughtful, structured interview questions are necessary.
- ▶ Be aware of legality issues when interviewing.

Here are some ideas to ensure you are prepared for the interview:

- ▶ Recognize that this is an important, stressful event and that significant formality is needed.
- ▶ Construct a schedule for the interview including time to establish rapport, sell the position and the farm, ask interview questions, respond to the candidate’s questions, tour the facility and the farm, and meet other farm personnel.
- ▶ Make certain that the candidate fully understands in advance what to expect – anything he/she should bring or prepare, interview time (start and end), interview location, interview schedule and format, appropriate dress.
- ▶ Greet the candidate upon his or her arrival and make certain that you devote you undivided attention for the duration of the interview. Remember that you only have one chance to make a first impression. Make a great impression!!! You do not want the candidate you choose to turn you down.

- Make certain the candidate know exactly what to expect when he or she leaves the interview. What and when is the next step.

A prepared set of questions to be asked of all candidates is a unanimous recommendation by all interviewing experts and practitioners. The only point of dispute among the experts concerns the advisability of asking follow-up questions to pursue points raised in the answer. Personally, I suggest using follow-up questions on a limited basis. The best way to reduce the need for follow-up question is a well designed set of questions.

How do we write good interview questions? You should begin by writing a series of questions for each of the competencies. The following are example questions for the four milker competencies identified above:

Successful experience doing repetitive tasks

- Describe your job experiences especially those related to milking or other repetitive work. (You can use follow-up questions as needed so your completely understand their job experiences).
- Tell me about the last time you learned or expanded your skills in milking or other repetitive work.
- Where do you feel your greatest training needs would be to excel in this position?

Team player

- Give me an example of when you worked very effectively as a team member?
- Do you prefer to work alone or with others? Why?
- Give me a recent example where you had a fellow employee with a poor attitude. What did you do?
- What characteristics are very important to you in your co-workers? In your supervisor?

Reliable

- Give me an example of a time when you were late for work. How did you handle the situation?

Many of us have a tendency to ask question that begin with “what would you do if ...?” Research and interviewing experience has shown that a better question begins with “tell me about the last time this happened ...?” Several questions of this type – called behavioral questions -- are included above.

Equal employment opportunity (EEO) laws bar any business or organization from making human resource decisions on the basis of race, color, gender, religion, national origin, physical and mental handicap (disabilities-must make reasonable accommodations), pregnancy, age, or veteran status. Three points to guide you:

- ▶ A general guideline is to ask only about those things that are unquestionably related to the job and the applicant's ability to succeed in the job. If the interview questions concern work experience, knowledge and skills required for the position, and attitudes and behaviors required to succeed in the position; illegal questions will be neither needed nor useful.
- ▶ Avoiding illegal questions is most difficult in writing questions concerning attitudes. The key is to identify the desired attitude rather than attributes that are positively correlated with the attribute. For example, many managers believe married employees are more reliable than single employees. Asking about marital status is illegal; it is also undesirable because not all married applicants are reliable (we can this stereotype bias). Asking questions that directly address reliability are both legal and superior interviewing.
- ▶ The emphasis of the discussion on equal opportunity in interviewing typically focuses on formal interview questions. In my experience the likelihood of slipping and asking an illegal question is much greater during the informal discussion times of an interview. Every interview requires time to relax and build rapport with the applicant, but no part of the interview can include completely informal talk.

The following are some questions that are or could be illegal with explanatory discussion?

- ▶ "What organizations, clubs, or societies do you belong to?" Since many answers would identify religious or other affiliations, they are usually considered illegal questions. If you are looking for a specific skill important to succeed in the position, ask about the skill. For example if leadership is a needed skill, ask about leadership experience.
- ▶ "Can you provide a photograph of yourself?" Illegal as it identifies race and potentially national origin.
- ▶ "What arrangements have you made for childcare?" Illegal. If you are concerned about an applicant being able to arrive on time especially with your early-starting positions, the appropriate question is "Can you meet all of the requirements (early start time) of the position?"
- ▶ "Have you been arrested?" This is illegal due to our presumption of innocent until proven guilty. You can ask if a candidate has been convicted.

- ▶ “Are you available for work on weekends?” This is considered an illegal question if there is a presumption that the position is a week day job. It could then identify religious affiliation. There is no issue as long as your recruitment material clearly identifies that the position includes weekend work. It would still be better to ask “Can you meet all of the requirements (weekend work) of the position?”

Successful interviewing = Preparation + Structured Questions – Illegal Questions.

■ A Concluding Remark

Recently I coached a manager much like most reading this article through the above procedures. He had previously essentially hired the first candidate. I asked him how he felt after he hired an outstanding candidate. His answer was “It was easier!” Although it seems difficult and time consuming, hiring outstanding candidates produces rewards far greater than the cost.



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