

## **Get Serious About Selecting Employees**

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Last Year Ed, made the decision to hire Jim as the new feeder on Ed's dairy. Jim seemed excited when he came to the farm. Jim said he had worked on a farm in Wisconsin while he attended high school and had spent time working on several construction jobs since then. Ed had briefed Jim on the job of a feeder (Jim said, "no problem"). Ed walked Jim through a several feeding shifts (Jim said, "no problem"). But 6 months later when the cows had lost a third of their production, (Jim said, "I was supposed to change how much they got fed every time the nutritionist came?") and a hydraulic pump later (Jim said, "I needed to add oil to the tractor?"). Ed decided it was time to do things differently (Jim said, "I'm fired?"). Hiring the right person might well be the most critical management decision made on some dairies. In order to be successful as an employer you need to have the right employees.

## **Getting Ready to Interview**

The first step on the road to employment bliss, is deciding what you need from a particular job. Is this a temporary or permanent situation? This can affect the potential pool of applicants. Is there a job description? Does it need updating? If there is no job description, consider writing one; there are a variety of aids available. Then the time has come to attract applicants. There are several options here; newspapers, job services, or word of mouth. Take advantage of as many options as possible to maximize the number of applicants.

Now that the applicants are banging on the door, an application form is the item that will help sort through candidates. The application form should be simple, but include personal information such as phone number, address, education and job skills, information on previous employment, including dates and responsibilities. However, don't ask about age, national origin, physical or mental disabilities, or similar lawfully protected characteristics. With the applications in hand you are prepared for the next step: the interviews.

Interviewing has the most impact when filling a position that will have supervisory responsibilities. For other situations interviewing can be less complex, but is always recommended. In either case a good interview requires preparation. Consider what questions you should be asking; also think about what questions would not be helpful. One strategy is to profile your best employees. Consider what behaviors allow them to be successful within your management system (see “select Employees Based on Behavior”, Michigan Dairy Review, Vol. 6, No. 3, p. 12). Remember, attitude is not everything, actual job skills are important too. Also keep in mind that the ability to develop new job skills might make an inexperienced candidate fit your team better than an experienced candidate. Know what skills this position requires before the interview starts. Spend time inventorying the specific job skills needed for this position.

## **Interviewing**

When the time for interviewing arrives, bring candidates in individually. Trying to interview more than one person at a time is often counter-productive and inappropriate. The interviewer can't give individual candidates their undivided attention, and the candidates cannot present themselves in the best possible light. The interviewer should strive to create an open, relaxed, non-threatening atmosphere. Remember, you are marketing your business. Interviewing a prospective employee while driving around checking crops, shopping for hydraulic hoses or arguing with the milk inspector, is not a good approach. Clear time on your schedule. Set up some chairs and a table in a quiet place, and give the candidate the opportunity to impress you.

Questions during the interview should be open-ended. Ask questions that sound like, “What do you think about ...?” or “How would you approach ...?” Ask few questions which can be answered with one or two words. The objective is to evaluate each candidate and find out how they would go about correcting or managing a situation. “Imagine the milk cooler has broken down during the evening shift. What would you do?” These types of questions put the candidates in a position to give you a picture of how they think.

Remember, while you are determining whether a candidate is right for the job, the candidate is also deciding whether he or she wants to work in your business. Provide a realistic preview of the job in question and your expectations in writing. Provide opportunities for the candidates to ask questions and talk about their expectations from a job. This will allow the candidates to give you insight about their reasons for seeking employment in your business and what is important to them.

### **Sampling the Candidate's Work**

A simple test or work sample activity can be scheduled. Because certain job skills were already identified in the job description, some of these can be used as a test. Tests might include handling cattle, milking, operating certain equipment or something as simple as lifting a bale of hay as evidence of fitness for the job. This also could be a time to involve current employees. They can help develop tests by pointing out which skills are most important for a particular position. They could supervise the candidate while milking or work with the candidate while moving cattle from pen to pen. By doing this you can get a "second opinion" from others already involved in daily operations. Finally, if several candidates qualify for employment, a second interview or a more detailed check of references might be appropriate.

### **Equal Employment Opportunity**

The need to be aware of, and in compliance with state and federal equal opportunity and anti-discrimination law is paramount. As in the application form, you may not ask for physical or mental disabilities during the interview. You may, however, ask whether the candidate would need any accommodations to be able to do the job. Also, you may not ask about arrest records - you may ask about convictions (carefully worded). Specific information on the rights of employees and employers are available at <http://www.eeoc.gov>. If you are new to hiring employees you might find useful information at Dr. Bitsch's website (<http://www.msu.edu/user/bitsch/>). Go to "Materials by MSU Extension" and look up the "Agricultural Employers' Checklist."

Equal opportunity means treating each potential employee the same as every other. The best way to do this is to develop a plan for the interview process. Stick to this plan as close as possible, so each candidate can be evaluated equally against the others. Job descriptions help here, as does taking notes during the interviews and tests. In addition a well-done selection process will help the employer build a positive image with the candidates. Kim Watson, writing for Dairy Herd Management Magazine says, “Building a positive reputation as an employer begins with the hiring process.”

### **Getting the Most Out of Your Effort**

This reputation is based on communication. Start by acknowledging the receipt of a candidate’s application. If you screen out applicants before interviewing, let them know as soon as possible. Tell them they had great qualifications but they aren’t going to fit your needs at this point in time. If they leave feeling good about themselves, the “word” will get around concerning the fair way they were treated. This in turn will enhance the farm’s reputation as a “good” place. Be especially careful with the candidates that you think might work well if your first choice does not accept. Tell them you were very impressed although you decided to hire someone else. Thank them for applying and ask if you may keep their application on file in case you need more help in future.

After you made an offer to your number one and it has hopefully been accepted, don’t forget the most important step for starting your new employee off on the right foot is the job orientation. Take time or have a trusted employee take the time to orient the new employee to your dairy and the job. You do not want to have him or her guess what is expected of them. Time spent on orientation will be repaid many times in future. A helpful article on the orientation process is available on the internet. Follow the favorite links on Dr. Bitsch’ website to “Agricultural HRM” and click on “Orienting New Dairy Farm Employees,” by Bernie Erven, Ohio State University’s well-known Human Resource Specialist.

## **Key Points**

What is most important about the hiring process? Understand what this job in particular requires from your future employee. Take your time and don't get hurried. If there is an urgent need to fill the position, hire someone temporary, e.g., a student. Don't hire someone if you have doubts about him or her. Do another search. The secret to hiring exceptional people: keep an open mind during the process. The best future employee might not be the most obvious one.