

Can't find employees – Improving the odds

They are out there. We all know of at least one of them. Those dairy producers who are never short of help. Whenever an employee quits, another seems to sprout from the earth to take their place. What is it about the way they do business that makes it so easy for them to find help? We might even call them “preferred employers”. Preferred employers as a group, fill open job positions more easily, keep employees longer, and have employees with greater job satisfaction. In this article we will consider some of the various aspects of filling an open job.

The first step in filling a job is to be prepared to fill it at all times or put more simply, to plan ahead. Unforeseen circumstances might cause openings. Management changes or expansion plans might require replacement or addition of employees. The preferred employer has a plan realizing that any employee could quit tomorrow. The plan identifies specific tasks that fit into a job profile or job description. While each job description applies to a specific employee, keep in mind we are not hiring employees and creating jobs for them. We are creating positions and filling them with the person with the best skills for that position and the best fit with the team. Whenever a position opens, the employer has already identified the job skills needed for that position and can proceed quickly to fill that job opening. Having a job description at hand provides employers with flexibility. As businesses grow or change over time, job descriptions might need to change or the job requirements may change. Developing a method for updating will allow you to tailor job descriptions to the employees once they are part of the team.

But how does that preferred employer find prospective employees so quickly? They almost seem to have people waiting for jobs to open up. Well, actually some do. Don't underestimate the people applying for work on your farm. Those first quality applicants we would love to have working for us already know what types of employers they want to work for. They quickly discover what type of employers are the "good" employers and also what types of employers are less desirable to work for.

This goes a long way in explaining why the some employers usually have a larger pool of applicants to choose from. What other strategies do these preferred employers use to increase the odds of finding better quality applicants? They use more than word of mouth and luck to attract potential employees. They spend time "getting the word out" that they are hiring, plus they use several methods of getting that word out. Let's look at a few.

Getting the word out

While word of mouth is an old and still useful way to recruit workers in the community, it is dependent on the local availability of potential employees to be successful. There are several things that can be done to improve the chances of hiring good employees using word of mouth. First, potential employees need to have a positive image of you as an employer and a place to work. Do you have a good reputation as an employer? Are you someone known to have a positive attitude or a negative one? Do you always have a

smile and nod for neighbors or do people avoid you because all you have to say is negative and sour? This in itself can add or subtract from an employer's desirability. Is the work site inviting? Put yourself in their place, if you drove into the yard for the first time what conclusion might you draw about the people who owned the farm? What benefits or perks are available to the employee? In the middle of January the boss can have a "meeting" with Oprah every afternoon in the house, but where can those faithful employees warm up or take a break from the cold? This type of situation can lead to increased employee turnover. All these things are part of what makes some employers more successful than others. What else can be done to improve the odds in landing that special employee?

Advertising is a tool that many prospective employers use to attract potential employees. Think of it as a personal ad for your farm. The more information included about the position itself and the skills needed by the applicant, the better the chances are that an applicant with those skills and an interest in the job will apply. But be careful, some ads work better than others; some attract more applicants. The following are examples of some good and bad employment advertising.

Not so attractive ad: Help wanted. Farmwork. Call 517-555-4545

Why is this a bad ad? It does no screening; that is who should apply and who should not; required skills are not listed. It does not say anything about the work to be done:

Farmwork can mean very different things from one farm to another.

An attractive ad

What are we looking for in a good ad? Say something about you and your dairy:

“Happy Cows Dairy Farms: Happy Cows Dairy Farms is a 1000 cow dairy with 3000 tillable acres in the Saginaw area”

Specify the position you want to fill: **“Our expanding team is looking for an experienced HERDSMAN or HERDSWOMAN”**

Provide some detail and career outlook: **“A successful applicant will be responsible for managing reproduction, nutrition, and the herd health aspects of our operation”**

Specify required skills: **“Minimum of 3 years of experience, commercial drivers license required, ability to pregnancy check and inseminate cows required”**

Specify extra skills: **“Spanish language skills appreciated”**

Specify what you are offering in return: **“Competitive wages based on experience”** or name the exact range: **“\$7.50 to \$9.25 per hour”** or **“\$35,000+ per year based on experience”**

The extras: **“Benefit package, including retirement plan, medical plan, and paid vacation”**

Give a contact person to call with questions and an address where to send, fax, or email a résumé if you require one: **“Call Nancy, our team leader, weekdays between 3:00 and 6:00 pm at 123-1234 or send résumé to 1313 Mockingbird Lane, Saginaw Mi 48605”**

More places to look

Other things that employers do to improve their pool of applicants is to include unlikely candidates. For example, dairy producers have found that there is virtually no job on the modern dairy in which a woman can't succeed. In fact you might just be turning down the best employee you ever had by not considering women. Minority employees are also an emerging source of dairy farm labor and management personnel. It might be time to consider these options the next time a position opens up at your dairy.

Another way to look for candidates is through radio advertising. This is not only a good way to be heard outside the farm community, but can also be tailored for specific groups, such as Hispanic employees that might be listening to a local Spanish language station. If you are willing to give it a try, get professional help with your ad.

Finally, preferred employers are not afraid to look outside the immediate vicinity for potential employees. In the case of a search for key skilled labor such as a herds-person or feeder, looking beyond the range of the local newspaper might be needed. There are resources available through the Michigan Department of Career Development for helping employers to identify and meet prospective employees. The starting point for exploring this option is a trip to the Department's website at www.Michaglabor.org. From here information is available for both prospective employees and employers. The Department of Career Development can also serve as a link to out of state applicants. In either case, there are still a variety of opportunities available for dairy producers to work toward increasing their pool of job applicants on the next available opening.

Dr. Vera Bitsch, Agribusiness Management Specialist, Department of Agricultural
Economics, MSU

Dean Ross, MSU Extension Dairy Agent, South East Michigan