

Staffing the Farm Business

Who Gets to Work in an Agricultural Business

Agricultural businesses are structured organizations that produce food and fiber. Through a different prism, they are collections of people, and it matters who those people are. More than two million people are hired each year to work on farms, ranches, and other agricultural workplaces in the United States—many in multiple jobs. The employment of every one is the result of a selection decision. How do we decide who gets to do what?

Last summer a grower called right after losing his third tractor driver in two months. “Can you change my luck?” he pleaded. “I had to fire the first two before they destroyed my permanent crops entirely, and the third seems to have disappeared. One of my irrigators knew the first guy—said that they had worked together in Colorado a couple of years back—but he took out four rows of vines on his second day here, so I had to get rid of him. The next one came around looking for work on that same day. He looked just like a tractor driver, and I figured that it was fortunate to find him so easily in the middle of July like that. He certainly talked a good game, but a couple of my orchard workers told me that they saw him smoking funny cigarettes and bumping into trees out there. The last straw was when he blew an engine on me by forgetting to keep the fluid levels up. I think he may have been stealing small tools from the shop, too. After that experience I was determined to fill the job with someone I could trust. I gave it to my best general laborer, a guy who had been with me for eight years. After four days on the job he never showed up again.”

The picture was beginning to come clear. This rancher had hired three tractor drivers, but, like many farm and non-farm employers alike, he did not really select them. Why is it that more effort goes into choosing spark plugs to put into machines than drivers to put on them?



Except perhaps for owner-operators and members of their family, people do not turn up working on farms by virtue of their own unilateral decisions. Farmers make choices about where to look for people to work in their operations and about which of those who are available to hire. Because of its obvious effect on organizational capacity and potential, employee selection is a critical aspect of personnel management in any business. Many risks flow from a poor or unlucky hiring decision.

Whether a single tractor driver is performing well or poorly can have a profound effect on the bottom line. Mechanics and production managers generally have even greater impacts. Performance of the farm organization as a whole depends on the capabilities and motivations of all the people who work in it. They are, in turn, affected by many aspects of personnel management decision making and practice, including day-to-day supervision, orientation, training, compensation, and evaluation. No area of personnel management, however, is more important than employee selection. Thought and care are needed in selection of short-term seasonal, as well as long-term, employees.

Although engaging labor through farm labor contractors (FLCs) removes many hiring decisions from the farm operator's hands, it by no means eliminates all choice. Selection of the contractor, sort of a wholesale hiring decision, has magnified consequences for production and important legal implications. Just as direct employment is subject to regulatory constraints, so is the decision to do business with a contractor (discussed in Chapter 2). Farmers are required to take reasonable steps to verify that every FLC they retain is registered with the U.S. Department of Labor and, in many states, licensed by state departments of labor or industrial relations.

Performance-related knowledge and skills are not evenly distributed in the workforce. People vary in their backgrounds and characteristics that translate into different levels of ability in different types of jobs. On any given task, some workers can outperform others, and performance of all workers varies within a range over time. The central objective of employee recruitment and selection is to put capable people into jobs for which they are qualified and are likely to do their best work most of the time, within the conditions set by other managerial decisions.

Is there a sure-fire way to choose the right people? Absolutely not. But while there is no perfect formula or technology for getting the right people into every job on the farm, managers are far from powerless to improve their odds. Most organizations can do better at deciding whether an individual applicant possesses the skill, knowledge, and ability for a given job. Uncertainty can even be reduced, though perhaps not as much, about attitudinal qualifications that often spell the difference between whether ability possessed gets applied or not and for how long.