



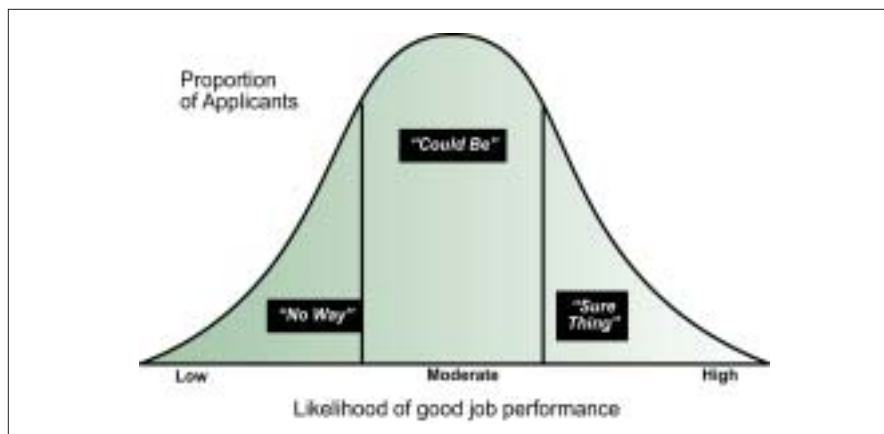
## Choosing to Hire a Capable Workforce

Inconsistency between job requirements and individual abilities is a prime foundation for poor — as well as unsafe — performance. It also stimulates employee turnover. Both production below par and turnover above it translate into dollar costs.

Most agricultural jobs entail manual tasks in which physical effort and use of hands achieve tangible results. Research shows that the best performers in such jobs typically produce at least twice as much as the worst. Is one top-notch pruner or harvester more valuable to a farm than two lousy ones? Aside from obvious implications of a 2:1 production-quantity ratio, inferior work can exact a toll in terms of tree or vine condition, animal health, equipment reliability, and supervisory headaches. Impacts of differences in performance among irrigators, herdsman, mechanics, foremen, ranch supervisors, and pesticide applicators are usually even greater than for pruners and harvesters.

Work performance depends on ability and motivation, and neither is sufficient without the other. The most capable person still performs poorly if motivation is low. Likewise, the most eager worker cannot be very productive without ability. Potential employees possess a range of ability levels and hence capacity for high performance. Figure 3.1 represents a normal distribution of potential incumbents across ability levels pertinent to a job.

Figure 3.1. Improving odds through selection.




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As indicated in the figure, a small percentage of potential employees, the “sure things,” are bound to produce fine work, even without careful management after selection. Another small group, the “no ways,” are unlikely to perform well, no matter how high the pay or inspiring the supervision. Most people, the “could be’s,” fall between these two extremes. The level of their performance depends on the quality of management after selection. The further to the right an individual is on this graph, however, the less compensatory or remedial management is needed after selection. Effective selection raises the odds of obtaining the more able employees, those who hold up the right side of the distribution curve.

A secondary objective of effective selection is to help engage employee motivation. Although this purpose is more a function of other personnel management decisions (about job design, performance appraisal, and pay), the selection process can certainly help. In describing his rigorous selection process, a packing plant manager pointed out that it helps to instill the belief in employees that their jobs are owed to their own abilities, not luck or any outside agent. Since lack of ability not only hinders performance directly but also leads to reduced motivation in the long haul, the selection process is always a prime place to look for sources of “people problems.”

Beyond the performance angle, selecting with care makes legal sense. It has become increasingly difficult to remedy a poor selection decision through discharge. The doctrine of “employment at will” has been eroded by both statutes and legal case decisions. Statutory bans on discrimination may be used to challenge firing, and case law has expanded employer exposure to litigation after discharge. Given the potential liability associated with wrongful discharges, it pays even more to select well in the first place.

### **Approaches to Selection**

Discriminating among applicants with respect to job-related attributes (e.g., understanding of the vine cycle, manner with animals, ability to carry 30 pounds for most of the day) is both legal and smart management. Federal and state laws, however, prohibit hiring-discrimination based on several personal factors (e.g., race, gender) that have no bearing on ability to perform most jobs.

We can distinguish the ways of filling jobs according to the extent of job-related discrimination they entail. Figure 3.2 shows a continuum of approaches that range in structure from casual to formal. Holding down the casual extreme is the “chance” approach, wherein, for example, every third applicant or every one who makes it through the gate is selected for whatever job is open. Next over from that end of the scale is the “emotional” approach, which relies upon intuition or gut feeling. It results in the selection of the applicant who feels right—for any reason or no reason whatsoever.