

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.

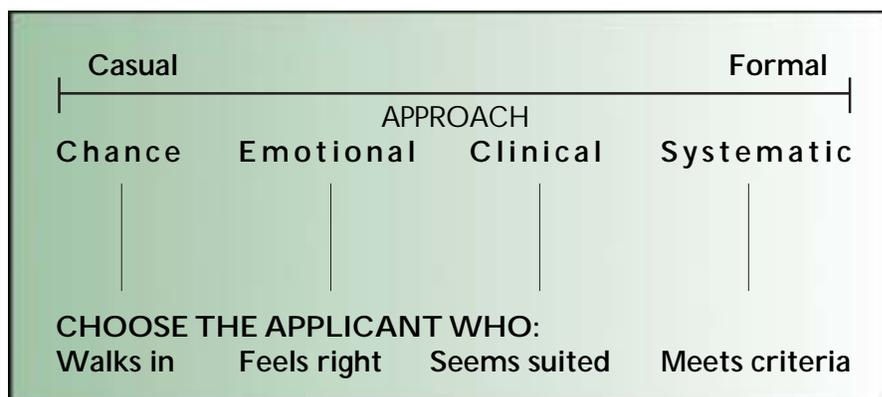
Approaches to Selection

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.

Further toward formality is the “clinical” approach, used by the employer who has some notion of what the job requires and then chooses the applicant who seems most suitable. A grower who talks with prospective mechanics, asks to see their tools, and calls their previous employers is probably using the clinical approach. Finally, at the formal extreme is the “systematic” approach, in which “suitable” is clearly defined and applicants are assessed in terms of specific criteria directly related to the job in question.

Figure 3.2. Approaches to selection.



What approach is most common in agriculture? When asked, most growers and supervisors chuckle a little and then point to the left side of the scale, often even believing that the somewhat greater expense of a systematic approach will save money and aggravation in the long run. Moving even a bit toward the right of the scale in Figure 3.2 by putting additional care into the selection of at least key employees can make a large difference in quality, performance, and morale of farm staff.

Two axioms underlie the use of a systematic approach to employee selection. The first is that people differ in background and characteristics (e.g., mechanical shop experience, comfort around large animals, hand-eye coordination, and ability to read or speak Spanish), and that individual differences translate into different capabilities to perform job duties (e.g., repairing tree shakers, guiding cows into the milking parlor, wrapping lettuce, following written irrigation schedules, staying abreast of scientific literature, communicating with a harvest crew). Second, the interests of both employers and workers are served when individual capabilities fit with job requirements.

Hiring Less Than the Best

Even if they favor a systematic approach, growers may have reason to deviate from trying to make the best possible fit between job requirements and current qualifications of individual applicants. Promotion-from-within policies, though beneficial in other ways, can seriously constrain freedom to hire the best-qualified individual available. Systems that advance employees strictly on the basis of their