

Misinformation or misinterpretations about the job can be minimized through good communication at this early stage. Some employers who want to get it straight from the beginning offer applicants a written job description. Some supplement the description with other written information about the company and its terms of employment. Others communicate solely through personal discussion.

A “realistic job preview” that describes pleasurable, as well as problematic, aspects of the job encourages many an unsuitable candidate to self-select out of the running. If the job requires long hours under a hot sun, endless repetitions of the same operation, fending off corny jokes from Cousin Louie, heavy lifting, tolerance of a surly supervisor, strict punctuality, or concentration amidst deafening moos, why not let the applicant know it right up front? You may lose a few applicants, but you also will prevent much early turnover caused by disillusionment and reality shock.

Similarly, using the preliminary interview to inform applicants about the balance of the selection process often saves the employer from considering further some of the unqualified candidates. In typical cases, applicants withdraw after merely being told that a performance test and reference check will be used to confirm their statements on a written application form.

Written Applications and Resumes

Next to the interview, the written form is the most commonly used selection tool. Both application forms and resumes can efficiently deliver large amounts of relevant information about workers cheaply and in reasonably comparable form. Work experience, education, training, and personal characteristics usually are included. An application form to be completed at the office can serve as an elementary test of literacy and ability to follow instructions. Written biographical data may raise specific points to be explored in a subsequent interview.

The employer can ask specific questions about job history on an application form to get an idea of whether and when the person has worked in similar operations before and to help gauge how much training the worker would need if hired. To help assess familiarity with the language of commodity production, the application might ask workers to describe the kind of work they have done or positions held.

Many application forms ask for information of little job relevance and dubious legality. While standardized or commercially available forms may seem useful, generally they both contain some irrelevant items and omit information that is pertinent. Laws, court rulings, and administrative guidelines have challenged the job relatedness of items that used to be part of most application forms. Farm operators are well advised to either develop their own forms from scratch or carefully tailor standard ones.



State and federal laws ban discrimination on the basis of race, religious creed, color, national origin, ancestry, physical handicap, medical condition, marital status, sex, or age. In addition, they discourage questions about personal variables as child-care arrangements, a spouse, height and weight, pregnancy, membership in organizations, or home ownership. While by themselves such items are not illegal, the employer shoulders the burden of proving nondiscrimination if a complaint is filed.

A final consideration with regard to written biographical data is that fabrications are common. Every now and then we hear about a surgeon who has been operating at the county hospital without benefit of medical degree and formal education. How did he get there? Somebody once took his word about his qualifications. Although some surgeon stories end with an ironic twist about the impostor's superior performance, how frequently do fabricated claims about nursery experience, mechanical knowledge, or typing speed lead to lousy on-the-job performance?

The moral is obvious. The written word does not necessarily reflect reality (nor does the spoken word). Talk can be cheap, even in written form. It is best to use written forms to gather data on objective, verifiable items, and to use one or more of the other information sources to spot-verify them. Tests and structured interviews can be used to check applicant allegations and manager assumptions. References also may be useful as a supplement to, not substitute for, the other sources.

Tests

The very word—test—strikes fear into the hearts of both job applicants and managers. Emotional, practical, and legal factors have kept many farm employers from using tests in pre-employment screening, and that is regrettable. Only through some form of testing can farmers (and other employers) find out what a job applicant really can do. Testing helps distinguish a person who can actually do the job from one who talks a good game in an interview.

Basically, a test is any means of sampling a person's behavior for assessment. The ideal selection test samples the behavior required in performance of a given job. Since it is rarely possible to present actual job conditions to all applicants, different types of tests are used. The important principle to remember in using them is that the scores or assessments they yield should correlate highly with future job performance.

The extent to which a test does correlate with job performance is its validity. No test, in itself, is either valid or invalid. Validity is job specific—and often site specific as well. The exercise that effectively distinguishes good from bad milker candidates is probably far less valid as a predictor of truck driving performance.