

Introduction



Hired employees are particularly critical in western United States agriculture. While some labor is provided by farm and ranch owners, their family members, and cooperating neighbors, most production work is performed by hired employees, and the vast majority of field workers now are Latino immigrants. For too many farm business owners, the complexities of employment law, labor market dynamics, and interpersonal relations, compounded by their discomfort in dealing with people from a culture with which they are unfamiliar, ironically feed a reluctance to dig into the field of labor management.

Amidst concerns of competition from domestic and offshore producers, scrutiny of cautious lenders, services for sale from various vendors, tastes and preferences of discriminating consumers, and requirements of voluminous laws, farmers and ranchers are running businesses. Virtually all of them need to procure and manage labor. Of course, other resources—land, plants, animals, water, machinery, tools, and chemicals—are also important, but without the abilities and efforts of people in the industry, agriculture would not yield food or fiber.

The USDA distinguishes several types of farms — limited resource, retirement, residential/lifestyle, farming-occupation, large family, very large family, and nonfamily. Although farm businesses differ between and within these categories in their goals, strategies, use of resources, and the economic results, they have a commonality at the core. In all types of agricultural production and processing, people make the system run.

In all agricultural production and processing, people make the system run.

Competitive pressures have magnified the need for agricultural employers to operate efficiently, make good use of valuable human resources, and minimize avoidable expenses, including the costs of defending against charges of wrongdoing. The decisions by which people are managed in agriculture affect business results, worker quality of life, commodity prices and quality, and even the social fabric of rural communities. Opportunities are lost on farms where attention to labor management stops with keeping the “help wanted” sign clean and handy.

Does it really matter how agricultural labor is managed? What gains can be realized from improving personnel practices and skills? Some benefits were brought home to a group of farmers during a recent tour of two value-added agricultural processing firms. An advisor accompanying them describes the obvious differences:



As we went through the first firm, the farmers saw that employees were busy doing their jobs, but not with a lot of energy. The atmosphere felt cold. There was very little conversation between the managers conducting the tour and the working employees, and the relationship between them seemed very formal. Owners of the firm later talked about how tough it had become to make ends meet in their business. Labor costs were too high, productivity was down, rapid staff turnover was proving disruptive in many ways, and good employees were always hard to find. They were thinking of relocating and rebuilding in another region that they believed would have a “friendlier” business environment.

The tour then continued down the road a few miles to another firm that produces a similar product for the same market. The difference was astonishing. Not only were production lines flowing smoothly, but people had an energy to them, and there was a hum about the place. It seemed the very building was alive. We heard some task-related conversations spiced with occasional laughs, and managers and employees were interacting comfortably. Owners later talked about their recent growth, steady increases of both sales and profits, and plans for further expansion. Naturally, we all wanted to know the secret of their success. They replied without hesitation, “Our employees.”

Unlike the first firm we visited, this one had no problem finding the kind of employees it needed. In fact, well-qualified workers from other places often approached them looking for jobs, staff turnover was very low, and productivity was high. The owners’ main labor concern was that some employees were accumulating a great deal of their annual vacation leave rather than taking it during the year.

These farmers caught a glimpse of what many other practitioners, as well as researchers, have found: Effective personnel management can be a major competitive advantage and a lead indicator of a thriving business.

Who manages the agricultural labor force? More people have a hand in management than most of us realize. Their roles and the names by which they are commonly known differ across commodity sectors, parts of the nation, sizes of organization, forms of business, levels within the organization, and cultural backgrounds. The property owner, general manager, and designated human resource specialist make personnel management decisions, and so do the harvest manager, ranch or crew supervisor, patrón, foreman, majordomo, lead man, crew boss, chief mechanic, jefe, office administrator, the owner's wise and deft spouse, and many production employees whose informal influence much outweighs their job titles.

The things these individuals do to manage labor cover an expanse of human activity — deciding how many people to hire, showing a daughter or son how to drive a tractor, setting wage rates, recruiting employees, writing layoff and recall policies, filling out forms upon hire, explaining pick and prune techniques, bringing water and portable toilets to the field, checking on pack quality, adjusting for family emergencies, choosing a replacement foreman, trying to cool hostilities, selecting an employee of the month, administering first aid, documenting performance strengths and weaknesses, running a meeting, and bargaining with an insurance agent. Their duties are seemingly endless.

If you are currently working in any of these roles, if you are teaching those who will be, or if you are planning to be in the future, this book is for you. *Ag Help Wanted* is a guide for owners and managers at every level of agricultural and horticultural operation in the western United States. It provides ideas, practical guidance, and assistance with:

- Planning the division and coordination of work in agricultural production
- Recruiting and selecting employees for agricultural jobs
- Supervising, training, and tapping the motivation of employees to perform well
- Correcting employees and taking disciplinary action if necessary
- Communicating effectively with employees and others

Despite their astuteness and abilities, most managers in agriculture have little formal education in business and even less in human resource management. Growers and operators more typically have studied life science, liberal arts, engineering, or other nonmanagerial disciplines. In family operations, children and relatives often find themselves in management positions by virtue of their connection to the owners.

“Rocket science is easy. It’s managing people that’s hard.”

—Jay Levine,
Aerophysics Branch
Chief, Edwards
Air Force Base

As advertised in the title, this handbook presents guidelines. The term “guidelines” has come to connote legal restrictions and mandates, and indeed guidelines of the regulatory persuasion have a place here. But they are in the context of a management functions framework and are outweighed by guidelines that take the form of example — illustrations based on what other agricultural managers have done and are doing. A few “ideas in practice” that have been used successfully to reduce a labor risk or to improve an operational result, precede the first chapter. Each of these brief cases is structured similarly to identify the objectives of a practice, methods of its introduction and action, and evidence of its beneficial result. Scattered throughout the chapters, numerous other examples tell of policies and practices that provide points of comparison and may inspire adaption to other settings.

Other guidelines are made up of theories, concepts, and principles that have been distilled from research or other systematic observations of management. Much of the material comes from academic research designed to guide practicing managers in various industries. At a bare minimum, it provides a set of terms for thinking and talking more analytically about everyday managerial experience. This book also delivers enough description of technique to help readers who are taken with an idea to act on it.

Besides the substantive information contained in these pages, this book extends leads to sources of much more guidance. The text refers frequently to the companion website *AgHelpWanted.org*. The top page of this website is a portal that provides access to an electronic copy of the book and two kinds of supplementary resources. One is a collection of sample forms, examples, and cases within the *AgHelpWanted* site. The other is an organized and continually updated set of links to material elsewhere in the World Wide Web, including articles that elaborate on topics this book introduces and, perhaps more significantly, many public agency pages that assist in complying with current laws and regulations.

The book does not offer any surefire prescriptions, largely because there are none. Nor does it presume to advise in terms of musts and shoulds. Although it identifies and discusses the utility of many skills, by no means can it possibly build them through reading alone. The authors’ objectives are to enable and encourage professional development—growth of managerial understanding and mindset—by adding to existing sources of usable information, knowledge, tools, and inspiration.

We hope that in some measure this handbook enhances mindfulness about the decisions made in managing labor, constraints on them, options in management practice, the effects of alternative approaches on business operations, and the personal lives of employees and family members. Ultimately, these are the bottom lines for everybody. Our goal is ambitious but not unattainable. All the choices are yours.