

Practical Steps to Employee Selection



“My dad used to manage this ranch before I did, and I remember he used to tell me that sometimes you just have to put up with lousy employees. I believed that up to a few years ago. I realize now that you don’t have to do that. You can hire somebody who can meet all your expectations and maybe more.”¹

**Chris Nelson, Farm Manager
Cattle Ranch, El Nido, California**

While keeping within the law, *who* an employer hires is pretty much her determination—but one that ought not be taken casually. *Hiring the right person for the job may be the most critical management decision you will make.* If you hire the right persons, they almost manage themselves; hire the wrong persons, and all the money you invest in training and compensation will be wasted.

Consider the farm manager who lost \$80,000 in alfalfa. He had trusted an employee who claimed to know how to

bale. Or, the thousands of dollars lost by a hog producer in only three months as a result of hiring the wrong person.

Although employee termination is normally an option, it is one plagued with both legal, economic, and practical consequences. Once a person is hired, there often needs to be a compelling reason for termination. If an employee is not working out, however, action must be taken promptly. The longer a worker is permitted to retain a job, the greater the potentially negative consequences associated with a discharge.

Given the importance of employee selection, two chapters are dedicated to the topic. This one describes a step-by-step sequence to selection. We consider such factors as needed skills for the job, the design of a selection process, getting the most out of the various selection tools, and conclude with suggestions on how to bring the new employee aboard the organization.

The next chapter illustrates the process of validating your selection approach. An outline of a practical, yet comprehensive, approach to selection follows. You will need to adapt it to your needs and special circumstances.

DECIDE WHAT YOU NEED

Step 1: Determine whether a temporary employee is needed

Necessity can often be the catalyst for haphazard selection. When your milker leaves, the choice may be between taking the shift yourself, or hiring the applicant who just drove up to the barn. Such a casual approach sometimes yields excellent results. “A while back I got lucky when I hired someone the traditional way,” Bruce Burroughs, of Vista Farming in Merced, recalled. “This person worked out so well that I thought it would always be this easy.” But as Bruce found out, good luck runs out eventually.²

Sometimes a new employee is urgently needed. Hiring a temporary worker is a good alternative to employing a less suitable replacement under pressure. Written employment contracts for such fixed-term work may help you avoid misunderstandings and possible litigation when the employee is laid off at the conclusion of this work period.

Exceptional temporary workers can be encouraged to apply for permanent positions. You can share with such workers the criteria that will be used to make the final selection decision, and offer additional help and training. Throughout the process, it should be made clear to the temporary employee, as well as other personnel at the farm,

that you will hire the most qualified applicant.

A temporary employee has the advantage of having one foot in the door and the opportunity to learn what is important to you. Management benefits by having the occasion to better evaluate the individual’s performance and personality. The down side is having to disappoint the temporary employee who does not get the job—or the co-workers who were rooting for him.

The statistical chances are not high that a temporary employee turns out to be the best candidate once the position is opened. Clear communication will help alleviate possible disappointment but is unlikely to eliminate it totally. At the end, the responsibility for qualifying for the job needs to be the employee’s.

Seasonal employees, hired without the benefit of a careful selection process, can also be evaluated for future employment. The best workers can be invited to return back for the next season.

Step 2: Complete a job analysis, description and specification

A frequent sentiment among farm employers is that a good attitude and a lack of bad habits are the most important ingredients in the personal makeup of farm personnel. “Give me someone with a good attitude,” they argue, “and someone who will learn *my bad habits*—rather than those of a previous farmer!” It is indisputable that a good attitude is essential, but attitude alone does not make up for poor skills anymore than good skills make up for a poor attitude.

One would not dream of selecting an individual to represent one’s nation at the Olympics on attitude alone. Likewise, it is not an effective move to make selection decisions on the farm without testing for skills such as the ability to see what needs to be done, recognize difficulties, solve problems, make decisions, work at an acceptable pace, and consistently turn out quality results.

Successful employee selection is dependent on a clear understanding of a

job's components. A job analysis is used to identify job tasks and responsibilities. This may be accomplished by collecting information about the position; by interviewing workers, supervisors, and other farm employers; and by observing current employees. Other sources, such as the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* (DOT) or its replacement, the *Occupational Information Network* (O*NET, <http://www.onetonline.org/>), provide written job analysis data to get you started. Figure 2–1 shows an example DOT for a poultry hatchery manager. End products of a job analysis include a job analysis schedule, job specifications, and a job description.

180.167-046 MANAGER, POULTRY HATCHERY (agriculture) ³

Manages poultry hatchery: Plans, develops, and implements policies and practices for operation of hatchery to ensure attainment of goals and profitable operation. Arranges with farmers to supply eggs or obtains eggs from company flocks. Directs and coordinates, through subordinate supervisory personnel, hatchery activities, such as hatching of eggs, sorting, vaccinating and shipping of chicks, and maintenance of facilities and equipment. Prepares hatching schedules for variety of chicks, considering such factors as customer orders, market forecasts, and hatchery facilities and equipment. Arranges for sale of chicks to farmers or commercial growers. Interprets hatchery records and genetic data on chicks and advises customers regarding breeding, brooding, feeding, and sanitation practices to follow for various species of poultry. Arranges for purchases of equipment and supplies, such as brooders, incubators, feeds, and medicines. Prepares reports on hatchery activities, such as chick production and sales reports, required by regulatory bodies. May be designated by species of poultry hatched.

FIGURE 2–1

Sample DOT job description.

Job analysis schedule. This is a fancy name for a detailed, extensive, written job analysis. Elements of the analysis may include intellectual and physical requirements for the job, a comprehensive list of tasks to be performed, and perhaps an organizational chart showing how this position fits into the overall operation. The job analysis schedule serves to create job specifications and a job description.

Job specification. This tool consolidates the necessary employee qualifications identified in the job analysis schedule and lists them in terms of knowledge, abilities, skills, or licenses.

For instance, if a job analysis shows that an assistant herd manager has to lift 50-pound feed sacks, 100-pound calves, and 120-pound alfalfa bales, the job specification would simply read “ability to lift and carry 120 pounds.” Likewise, if a pesticide handler had to read pesticide labels and special reports, the job specification might state “ability to follow written instructions.”

Here are some other examples of job specifications:

- possesses a valid driver's license
- drives a wheel tractor
- backs up equipment onto ramp
- mends fences
- welds equipment
- maintains tractor
- irrigates corn and alfalfa

The employee selection requirements may emphasize skills and knowledge not easily learned on the job. It is often wise to select candidates who already have these skills rather than *hope* a candidate will be able to learn them after hiring.

A word of caution is not to take *any* skill, ability, or knowledge for granted. Are reading or math skills critical to the job you are trying to fill? Among a small sample of farm workers, I found that few knew how to divide or subtract, though most knew how to add and multiply. They also possessed limited skills reading a measuring tape, partly because they were used to the metric system. In another setting, even after an



In considering what talents are needed for a job, do not take any skill, ability, or knowledge for granted.

intensive day of training for job applicants, few individuals could pass a supervisory skills test where they had to correct an employee who had been consistently performing poorly. Other applicant weaknesses often go undetected in selection processes where there is no practical testing. An inexperienced agricultural technician turned wine into vinegar by improperly corking the bottles.

Job description. From the job analysis and specifications, farm employers can develop a job description. These help applicants obtain a realistic job preview. Job descriptions are generally brief (usually 1- to 2-page) position narratives with a job title, job summary, examples of job duties, supervisory relationships, and working conditions (Figure 2-2).

Title. Whatever title is used must accurately reflect the duties of the job. Job titles communicate subtle messages to applicants about the job. For instance, though the jobs might be identical, there is a difference in connotation between the titles of “herdsman” and “herd manager.”

Job summary. The job summary is usually a brief narrative containing information on duties. Additional information, such as hours of work,

vacation, and other benefits may be included in this section.

Job responsibilities. The list of duties usually starts with the most important or most frequently performed. Providing estimates of the percentage of time to be spent on important tasks can give workers a sense of the job components. Arbitrators recognize that management generally has the prerogative to add duties to an

Job Title	
Job Summary:	Last revised: _____
Examples of Job Responsibilities:	
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
//	
10. Other duties as assigned.	
Relationships:	
Working Conditions:	
Salary and Benefits:	

FIGURE 2-2
Job description structure.

individual's job description. This is also true where employees are represented by a union.⁴ Nevertheless, it is a good practice to include, under examples of duties, the line "other duties as assigned." From a practical perspective, however, employees need to be exposed to a large variety of duties within a short time of their selection. Morale is likely to fall when employees feel that a task is not part of their job description.

Relationships. This section includes information on reporting (who this individual will work for), as well as supervisory responsibilities, if any.

Working conditions. This is a good place to give applicants an idea of the hours of work and overtime requirements, how much work is performed inside or outside, and the type and condition of farm tools and machinery to be used.

Salary and benefits. Farmers determine what they feel a job is worth and what is an appropriate starting salary for a qualified applicant (see Chapter 8). Setting a salary is a delicate process. Using the term *starting salary* implies that employees will obtain raises as they acquire experience on the job.

It is good to mention a starting salary. Leaving pay considerations until later may well be a waste of time for both farm employer and applicant if their wage expectations differ considerably. Also, if a farm employer has a good sense for the prevailing wages, little is gained by advertising a starting salary as *negotiable*. You may be inadvertently encouraging applicants to negotiate for higher wages.

The salary and benefits section should also detail information about the location and condition of any housing provided and about other benefits, such as paid vacation, sick leave, and health insurance coverage.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) has given job descriptions additional importance: those written before a job is advertised can help defend employers' decisions about what constitutes the essential functions of a job if they are challenged under the ADA.⁵

Step 3: Weight the job specification items

Weighting job duties can help the farm employer assess the qualifications of competing candidates. Each skill, knowledge area, and ability is rated according to its importance to the job. A skill may be given less importance, for instance, if it can be easily acquired or is seldom used. In hiring a tractor driver one farm employer may give greatest importance to skills in operating a wheel tractor or crawler, but less to the ability to hook up implements. (An example of a weighted scorecard is found in Chapter 3, Figure 1.)

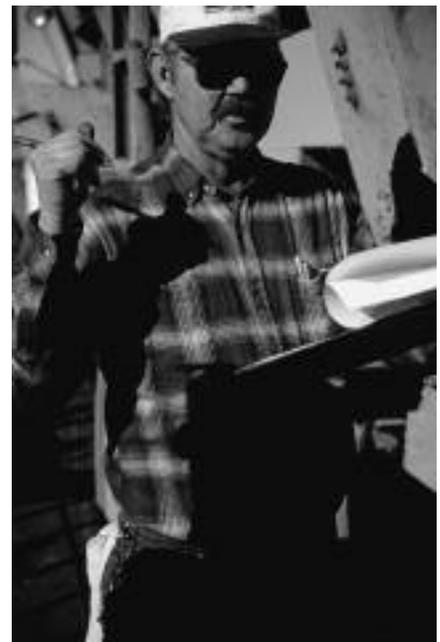
To arrive at the proper weight for a given factor, you can make forced comparisons between two skills, abilities, or knowledge areas. For instance, a cattle breeder might consider this question: "If two applicants are equal in every other way except their proficiencies in animal nutrition vs. computer use, which one would I rather hire?" By comparing imaginary candidates you can adjust the weights to reflect your preferences.

Step 4: Determine the recruitment strategy

Among the most frequent objections to the systematic selection approach discussed in this chapter, are concerns about getting enough applicants. How many people apply partly depends on your recruitment efforts, the type of job, labor market, pay, and the reputation of your farm. The larger the applicant pool, the greater the chance of finding qualified applicants. The most thorough selection approach cannot make up for a poor candidate pool.

Sources to help you advertise the position include present employees, other farm employers, previous applicants, trade journals, newspapers, vocational schools, universities, and employment agencies. The radio is a particularly good recruitment source for many agricultural jobs. Farm employers who are trying to attract Hispanic applicants often find great success through Spanish radio stations.

The recruitment process is critical to effective employee selection. The most thorough selection approach cannot make up for a poor candidate pool.



SIDEBAR 2-1

Attracting Workers to Agriculture

Some employers are hesitant to place ads, feeling that perhaps employees do not like agricultural work. As it turns out, farm workers love their jobs. Traditionally, agricultural work has not been held in high regard by the general population. It has been viewed as unpleasant, and as an undesirable way to earn a living. This opinion is supported by the popular press. Farm workers, however, do not generally share this negative view of farm work.

When 265 seasonal and year-round workers (in orchard, vineyard, vegetable, agronomic, dairy and livestock operations) were asked a series of questions to determine their true feelings and perceptions about their work, they had positive things to say. Workers rated their jobs on a 1 to 5 scale. A fantastic job was rated a 5, and a terrible one was rated a 1. On the average, farm workers rated their present jobs a 4. Crew workers, as well as other field workers such as irrigators and equipment operators, rated their jobs a 3.9, while dairy personnel rated theirs a 4.4. This is not to say workers did not have suggestions for improvement. They often spoke about the need for being treated with respect, as well as for higher wages.⁷

The farm reputation can go a long way to attract personnel. Employees will talk about their employer for good or for evil. Rob Morelli of Ollimac Dairies, Denair, California, goes out of his way to retain his employees and create a positive working environment at his dairy operation. Rob starts by paying a competitive wage (compared not only against neighboring dairy farmers, but also others with whom he may be competing to attract farm labor).

Besides wages, Rob feels he must provide housing, as do many dairymen in his area. Rob cautions, however, that run down temporary housing tends to attract temporary employees. That is why Rob goes out of his way to provide nice homes for his employees as well as the tools the employees need to keep these homes looking good. He makes it a point to catch employees doing good things and makes sure to compliment them so they feel appreciated. The day after an employee's child participates in a soccer match or piano

recital, Rob makes a point of asking how the youth did.

Bonuses and incentives also play a role in staying competitive. Rob Morelli pays a number of typical incentives, such as those related to milk quality, death loss, and reproductive efficiency. He also pays a feed accuracy bonus and an English-speaking bonus. The English bonus comes to \$50 a month for employees with whom Rob can communicate in English. Rob is the sole determiner of who gets the bonus.

A unique incentive given by Rob is a longevity bonus for every five years a worker stays. He will invite all the employees together and form a circle. Rob will then invite the honored employee into the center of the circle and tell everyone present how much he appreciates this employee and the work performed over the last five years. Next, Rob takes out ten crisp \$100 bills, and counting from one to ten places them on the hand of the employee.

When Miguel, a feeder at Ollimac Dairy, had stayed for ten years, Rob stepped up the celebration. Not only were the employees invited, but also all the families, including the children. Rob's wife provided ice cream for everyone as part of a special social. Eventually, for the recognition ceremony, they all formed a circle, with the guest of honor and his wife and children, in the center. Rob first thanked Miguel and his family for the excellent job Miguel had done. Next, Rob had Miguel and his wife place their hands out together to receive the \$1000 dollars, using the same approach described above. Rob then tells all who are attending the ceremony that he also has some tickets for Miguel and his family for three days to a family theme park; that they will need gas to get there, and so here is some gas money; that they will need a place to stay while they are there, and so here are confirmed reservations at a hotel; as well as money for food out while they are gone; and of course, five days paid vacation to do all of the above. The wife of another employee was so touched that she started crying. Rob says that he suspects she will go home and tell her husband that he better stay for ten years. Rob Morelli cautions that he could not have done this without the help of his wife, who had a better understanding of the likes and dislikes of his employees.⁸

Paul and Laura Fouts of Cortland, New York, found that radio ads allowed them to be quite creative, such as using sound effects. The radio station personalities helped write and read these. Their success with the radio spots led them to be more creative with their newspaper ads. Employees help by giving feedback or helping with ideas. The Fouts' are trying to attract people who may or may not have had previous experience with farming.⁶ Some farmers fear that by advertising job vacancies so openly they may attract undesirable applicants, but these may be eliminated at a later step.

Bernie Erven of Ohio State University is a pioneer in the area of effective recruitment. Erven suggests that farm employers talk about the many positive aspects of farm work, including the opportunity to raise a family in a healthier environment. Sometimes we can make working on the farm sound negative, he suggests. A creative ad can make a big difference. Bernie found this clever ad in *Hoard's Dairyman*: "**Minnesota Dairyman**, caring, understanding, witty, intelligent, ambitious, divorced, 45 years old, seeks woman of similar character who enjoys life and would help milk cows, etc. Cows first, romance second."

An excellent source of potential candidates are persons who come looking for work when you may not have any job openings. Sometimes farmers ask such visitors to fill out an application form. Anyone who has filled out an application lately knows, however, that they tend to be too detailed, ask too many questions, and often are not worth the effort for just a "maybe" for the future. A better approach is to simplify the process by asking potential applicants to fill a 3 by 5 card with the bare essentials: (1) applicant name; (2) desired job; and (3) phone number, or other information on how to contact them in the event a position becomes open.

Some farm employers prefer not to have potential applicants contact them directly, so they may take out a post office box for that purpose. Others may want to take advantage of their positive

reputation, and may provide the farm name in the ad, but include a "no phone calls" request. While the first call may be exciting, by the time the farm employer gets a dozen, she may get tired of answering questions and dealing with the interruptions. The first caller may get a forty-minute description of the job; the last one, two minutes.

Telephone recordings or Web pages are excellent ways for growers and producers to answer many potential questions, provide information about the job and operation in general, as well as an invitation to participate in an orientation day (more about this below). Webpages can include much information including photos of the farm as well as maps and directions.

DESIGN THE SELECTION PROCESS

A well-designed selection process will yield information about a candidate's skills and weaknesses, enabling the farm employer to make an informed choice.

Step 1: Determine which selection tools to use

Applicant skills can be evaluated through applications, interviews, tests, reference checks, letters of recommendation, and physicals. Some selection tools are more effective than others, but a combination of tools is usually best. Some farm employers feel strongly about using a one or two week *trial period*. A trial phase in conjunction with the rest of the tools described in this chapter can be very effective. A trial period alone, however, makes a poor substitute for a systematic selection approach. All too often, if a person is barely good enough for the job, he is allowed to stay on. The chances of selecting the right individual for the job based solely on a trial period are greatly diminished, as we shall see in Chapter 3.

Factors reflecting worker motivation, such as punctuality and attendance, may be elicited within the interview, but contacting previous employers may give more reliable information. If possible,

try to verify evidence of specific skills, knowledge, and abilities at more than one point in the selection process (Table 2-1). Time constraints may limit choices.

Step 2: Prepare questions and situations for written and practical tests, the interview and reference checks

At this point the farm employer converts important skill areas into specific questions or activities for the application, interview, and tests. Also, questions for the reference check may be drawn up. The left-hand column in Table 2-1 can serve as a checklist of attributes to be verified by selection tools.

Areas of inquiry can help determine an applicant’s aptitude for interpreting plant or animal health distress signs, capability with measuring instruments, command of another language, understanding of supervisory skills, lifting strength, or welding expertise.

Results are used to assess a candidate’s technical knowledge, general problem-solving ability, interest in the operation, and other job-related

attributes. Some queries or activities will elicit responses that can be judged objectively, such as how much pesticide should be mixed into a given number of gallons of water. Other responses may be more subjective, such as to an inquiry on how to deal with a negligent employee.

Step 3: Assign a sequence to hurdles

The farm employer can think of the selection process as a series of hurdles that applicants must clear in order to obtain the job. Each hurdle eliminates some applicants from contention. The sequence of these hurdles needs to be designed with care. Generally, the most expensive and time-consuming selection tools are used later in the selection process.

For example, in the selection of a herd manager, 12 candidates may have passed the dairy records and computer test. Since this is not the most important part of the job, high passing scores should not be a strict hurdle to eliminate contenders. Otherwise, the applicant pool might be narrowed inappropriately to those who understand records and computers but lack important hands-on skills with cattle.

TABLE 2-1
Determining where to check for skills, knowledge and abilities

Skills, knowledge, and abilities may be measured using different tools at different stages of the selection process. An "X" indicates a principal method for measuring that skill, knowledge, or ability; an "O" indicates a secondary method.				
Skills / Knowledge / Ability	Test	Interview	Application	Reference Check
Operating wheel and crawler tractors	X		O	
Adjusting / calibrating equipment	X			
Maintaining equipment	X	O	X	
Using implements (disk, plow)	X	O		
Controlling weeds, pests, diseases	X	O		
Directing efforts of others	X	X	X	O
Training employees	X	X		
People skills	X	X		X
Reading and processing information	X			

If there are only a few applicants, progressive hurdles are unnecessary. When selection tools are not used as hurdles, their sequence is less important. If all applicants will be interviewed and all take a practical test (or *job sample*), it does not matter much which of the steps comes first.

Often employers use biodata (information from applications and *résumés*) as the first step in eliminating applicants from consideration. This is useful if some applicants do not meet specific requirements, such as having a driver's or pesticide applicator's license. But excellent candidates may be eliminated if employers rely on more general qualifications—such as years of experience—as a screening criterion. Longevity in a position may have little correlation with job proficiency.

Furthermore, employers should not be overly influenced by nice-looking applications that may have been completed by someone other than the candidate. Professional *résumé* services can make candidates appear quite attractive on paper. The caution here, then, is that there may be little relationship between an applicant on paper and on the job.

Written exams for technical or managerial positions are an effective early hurdle (when ability to write is a requirement) because they are less expensive to administer than interviews

or practical tests. Reference checks and medical screening are usually the last two hurdles. (U.S. law requires that medical screenings, if they are used, take place *after* a job offer has been made.)

When candidates are encouraged to apply, invitations may include a description of the steps in the process, their sequence, and any required applicant preparation. The sequence of hurdles may be programmed to minimize travel and expense for both applicants and employer. A preliminary telephone interview with out-of-state applicants may eliminate unnecessary travel. Written tests can sometimes be mailed out-of-state when they can be administered to applicants by a trusted, qualified third party.

Step 4: Provide a realistic job preview

Applicants who have a clear understanding of what the job entails can make more informed decisions as to whether they want to apply. For instance, will the job meet their financial, emotional, and social needs? Selected applicants who have an accurate understanding of the job—of both its desirable and difficult aspects—are more likely to stay and succeed.

When described to workers, conditions do not have to be labeled as positive or negative. Workers can make their own judgment. For instance,

In a realistic job preview farmers try to present the job the way it really is. Selected applicants who have an accurate understanding of the job—of both its desirable and difficult aspects—are more likely to stay and succeed.



working alone will be viewed positively by one applicant and negatively by the next (see Chapter 23).

The *realistic job preview* begins with the job announcement and position description. As prospective applicants inquire about the job, farm managers can provide applications, position descriptions, and additional information. Although some employers use the preliminary interview to learn about applicants, the best use of this selection tool is to provide information to applicants.

If interviews as well as practical and written tests truly mirror the position requirements, these can also help candidates understand the job. If an applicant must lift half a dozen 3-wire alfalfa bales as part of the practical exam, he may eliminate himself if he has a bad back.

EXCHANGE INFORMATION WITH APPLICANTS

Step 1: Conduct a pre-interview (orientation day)

Good communication during the preliminary interview can minimize doubts about the job. One agricultural enterprise manager scheduled small groups of applicants for a tour of the ranch operation. This sort of informal pre-interview, where applicants have a chance to ask questions about the job and learn more about working conditions, is very effective. At this point the farm employer does not have to make any decisions about eliminating applicants from the next stage, but some will drop out on their own—better now than after they are on the job!

Bruce Burroughs received over 300 applications for a cow feeder position and invited all to an orientation day. Only 60 potential candidates showed up. That was a little indication of how serious the others were about the job. Bruce had the opportunity to talk to applicants about the position requirements, what the selection process would be like, and tour them around the dairy operation. Furthermore, Bruce

took the opportunity to give a mini-test to the applicants. This test helped him decide who to invite to the next hurdle. This was done in part because many of them had come from far away. The natural selection filter had to be a written test as it would not be practical to give a job sample test to all the applicants, and Bruce did not want to over-burden applicants by having them drive all the way back another day. The written test was very simple.

One question that a farm employer could ask in such a test might be, “You have seen a cow in heat, and there is no one around. Please write me a note indicating that cow number 312 is in heat.” If the person will need to deal with numbers on the job, perhaps a simple math question could also be included. Bruce did not want to eliminate people on the basis of how well they wrote, but since ability to communicate in writing was important, it would be the basis for inviting the top 20 candidates for the next hurdle in the process. More about written tests will be mentioned under that heading.

Step 2: Review applicants’ biodata (applications and résumés)

A properly designed application will help you check applicants’ minimum skills as well as their employment history. Very short employment periods, vague reasons for leaving previous jobs, and large gaps in employment history may all be cause for concern. Yet, too much credence has traditionally been given to biodata in the selection of personnel. Skills and abilities that applicants claim to possess do not always show up in their job performance.

Step 3: Conduct tests

Many types of tests can be used to measure an applicant’s qualifications. They can be classified as power versus speed tests, as well as written, oral, or practical tests. Tests can measure knowledge, ability, skills, aptitude, attitudes, honesty, and personality. Whatever the type of test used, however, the integrity of test questions needs to



be guarded. Test materials and scratch paper should not be removed from test sites by applicants, where they could possibly be shared with future applicants.

Speed versus power tests. *Speed* tests require applicants to perform repetitive tasks in a limited amount of time. They are typically used for skills such as picking, pruning and sorting. *Power* tests require applicants to demonstrate depth of ability rather than speed, such as in the diagnosis of a mechanical malfunction. You will still want to place reasonable time limits that resemble the reality of time pressures on the job.

Written, oral, and practical tests. A written test enables you to question an applicant on many areas in a short time period. Several formats may be used: multiple-choice, short-answer, fill-in-the-blank, and long-answer or essay questions. Though essay questions may be easier to construct, multiple-choice and short-answer tests are easier to

score. Tests that require interaction with a computer may also be given.

In “open book” tests, applicants can consult the reference materials that they would normally have available on the job. For instance, a farm employer may allow applicants for a vineyard manager position to use classification keys or other reference materials for identifying vineyard pests. Open book tests can be quite demanding and revealing of workers’ true abilities. References are usually most helpful to those who already understand the material.

Written exams provide a fine opportunity to exercise management creativity. For example, a dairy farmer can attach a DHI (Dairy Herd Improvement) report and ask applicants several questions that would reveal their understanding of these records as well as of herd management. Diagrams, slides, or photos of diseases could also be used.

Power tests require applicants to demonstrate depth of ability rather than speed, such as in the diagnosis of an ailment.



Much can be understood about applicants from observing how they move around animals. People who are scared of farm animals are often the ones who handle them roughly.

Rien Doornenbal, a dairyman from Escalon, California, talked about how it felt to give a test: “I knew what our ranch manager would be required to do and know, so it wasn’t hard to write up test questions. Telling [applicants] about the written test was hard for me to do. It wouldn’t be difficult to do the second time. At first I started giving the written test to one person at a time. Later, as I gained confidence in what I was doing, I started giving a group test, and that worked best.”

Although somewhat concerned about applicant reaction to the selection process as a whole, Rien reports: “Surprisingly enough, I got some good feedback about my selection process from the better qualified candidates. They said, ‘Hey, this is really neat.’ They thought I was going about this in the right way.”⁹ Ten years later, Rien was still using this approach to hire a manager for a second operation.

In practical tests, applicants are required to complete a job sample or a simulated task. *Job samples* may include pruning pear trees, milking cows, riding a horse, a quality control cherry sorting test, or backing up a tractor into an orchard row. *Simulations* are normally less realistic than job samples. Examples include demonstrating CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) on a dummy, lifting weights at a medically

supervised physical, “flying” a crop duster in a computer simulation or sorting plant substitutes (such as straws with various marks and cuts) instead of the real plants.

Simulations are particularly useful in the selection of supervisory personnel. Applicants may be asked to role play several scenarios such as giving effective praise and providing respectful, yet clear, discipline.

Bruce Burroughs set aside two days in which applicants were asked to demonstrate their skills with equipment and cows. With the help of other dairy personnel, he designed three practical test stations where applicants would perform tasks representative of what they would have to do on the job.

Before the first applicant ever set foot on the ranch for the practical test, Bruce and his team pre-tested each job sample station. Using “volunteer” applicants from among the employees and family, the team of evaluators observed where the tests had to be modified or adapted, and they discussed how to score different levels of performance consistently. The team decided that applicants would be scored on their ability to follow instructions, the precautions they took, task-specific skills, and general communication skills.

At the first station, the task was to load 300 pounds of haylage from a pit onto a mix wagon with a front-end loader. Next, applicants drove a mixer forward and then backed it up over a prescribed course. At the final station, each applicant had to herd a fresh set of three cows through a series of fences. Each station was staffed by trusted farm personnel who evaluated applicants on a prescribed scale. Beside the practical tests, each applicant went to the office for an interview.

The applicants varied enormously in their performance on the practical tests and not always in expected ways. One applicant had to take three trips to get enough silage, while most others did it in a single trip. Another banged the front-end loader too hard on the mixer. One was excused from driving the mixer after he failed to back up in a straight line and created concern that the

SIDEBAR: 2–2

Two Legal Concerns

The employer should be aware of two legal questions that can arise during practical tests: (1) At what point does a trial period become employment? (2) Is an applicant who is injured during a practical test covered by workers' compensation insurance?

First, when does the selection process itself become employment? Equipment operators may be asked to demonstrate ability by loading and unloading a tractor from a ramp, and managers may be asked to answer situational questions in an interview as part of the selection procedure. Because there is no resulting "product," most would agree that these workers are not employees, and, therefore, they need not be paid. On the other hand, if a dairy farmer "tried out" a dairy worker for a couple of weeks, most people would agree that this person was an employee, not an applicant.

Not all cases are so clear-cut, however. Does a 1-hour pruning test constitute employment? Would your answer change if the test were 15 minutes long? Two hours? A common sense approach is best. For instance, one pruner might contribute directly to profits in a 1-hour test, but another might harm the vines. To determine what constitutes a fair employment test resulting in a product, factors such as the total amount of work available and

the amount of supervisory and management time involved in evaluating the practical test should be considered. Most farm employers would not object to paying the workers for time spent on the test so long as they were not considered employees in terms of immigration, unemployment insurance, and a host of other laws.

Second, when job applicants are injured in an employment test, are they covered under the employer's workers' compensation insurance? An affirmative answer has been rendered by at least two state courts.

Employment tests, they reason, benefit both employer and employee.¹¹ The workers' compensation system should cover accidents during the selection process unless the employer was negligent.

Farm employers still need to think of the safety of the applicants and provide appropriate training. Instructing candidates on the proper techniques for lifting alfalfa bales, for instance, will not detract from their performance on a test measuring such a skill. If the candidate seems to be struggling with a task or doing something in an unsafe manner, it is better to stop the test rather than risk an accident. Some farm employers have taken out liability insurance for the eventuality of an accident, as well as for other related issues. As with any legal matter, make sure to consult with a qualified labor attorney.

machine could end up in the cow pens. At the last station, applicants were instructed to move cows through certain pens. One applicant made the job look easy while others struggled.

Noel Weeks of Nicolaysen Farms in Ripon, California, explained, "The way we tested [almond sorters] was by taking a scoop of almonds and weighing what percentage of the scoop contained good almonds [and] damaged ones. Almonds don't evaporate, so the percentage of worm damaged, or chipped almonds would remain the same. Some applicants would throw away some of the good stuff, too."¹⁰

The in-basket exercise is another form of simulation. Applicants receive a series of written notes and problems and must determine how—and in what order—they would handle each. In-basket exercises are useful to determine how applicants work under time pressure and how they plan their time. For instance, an applicant for a barn or equipment construction position may be asked to prepare a time line for different phases of the project. Dairy farmer Tim Wickstrom successfully used this approach to test accountant applicants on their time management and logical skills.

Observing how an applicant handles farm animals, starts a tractor, or hooks up a welding machine provides useful information about her experience with these tasks. People who are scared of farm animals are often the ones who handle them roughly. Nevertheless, such subjective observations should be transformed into objective measures whenever possible.

What tests measure. Tests that measure specific skills, knowledge, and abilities are the most useful selection tests. Intelligence and personality tests, on the other hand, are normally of limited utility. Intelligence tests may indicate a person's potential to analyze and digest information quickly, but may do little to show a person's practical skills. Neither will an intelligence test predict an applicant's motivation, confidence, or need for achievement.

Personality and honesty are important, but tests provide little help in evaluating these characteristics in a selection setting. Applicants can easily fake answers, and these tests are often offensive, prying into people's personal lives in areas that are not job related. Interaction with applicants, especially during the interview, can be a more useful means of evaluating attitudes and personality. Honesty tests may be prohibited by law in some instances, and it is doubtful that they are very helpful. This trait may be measured, in part, by checking references.

Step 4: Conduct interviews

An applicant for a ranch hand position claimed to know how to handle horses, mend fences, and have other skills related to the job. "Comes with the territory," he would answer each question about his ability. His lack of skills became readily apparent only after he was hired. Another cowboy watched as he attempted to saddle a horse and asked, "You ain't never rode a horse before, have you?" "No sir, I haven't," came the response. When asked about why he lied to the boss, the new worker replied, "Yeah, well, I was so desperate for a job that if he'd 've asked me if I flew an airplane I'd 've told'm I

could've."¹² Interviews are extensively used for middle and upper level jobs in agriculture, but often yield inferior results *unless they are carefully planned and combined with practical tests.*

If you are selecting pickers you may dispense with the interview with little negative consequence. Not so when choosing supervisors and managers. During the interview you have an opportunity to continue to gauge an applicant's leadership qualities and personality.

As with written tests, face-to-face questions or exercises can take several formats. These include short- and long-answer questions, applicant presentations, and situational responses ("What would you do if . . .?"). Some questions allow for a broader range of replies than others. "Closed" questions ask for specific answers, with little room for explanation. Typical closed questions may solicit true-or-false, yes-or-no, multiple-choice, or even fill-in-the-blank answers (for example, the name of an insect). Other questions are "open" and generally allow more flexibility in the response. The interview is an ideal context for open questions.

The interview gives you a chance to probe when unsure about an applicant's answers, capabilities, or work philosophy. Questions might cover the applicant's previous employment or responses to written test questions. Farmers may ask situational queries that in turn stimulate applicants to ask questions of their own. Candidates can often be evaluated by the kinds of questions they ask. The best type of questions that take advantage of the interview process are those that give applicants only part of the information. While some applicants will attempt to answer the question with only partial data, the really good ones will begin to ask you questions.

Chris Nelson of San Felipe Ranch showed supervisory applicants a videotaped scene of an employee arriving late to work. Applicants were asked, "What would you do if you were the supervisor in this situation?" Some immediately responded with unequivocal answers, whereas others

showed superior diagnostic skills by asking appropriate questions: “Is this the first time it has happened?” “How long has the worker been employed?”

Sometimes interviewers get the notion that they should make applicants squirm with difficult questions, especially those applying for the more stressful or demanding farm jobs, such as farm manager or herd manager. Some interviewers feel “that by asking offensive questions, they will be able to see the applicant’s ‘true colors’ and weed out those whose personalities won’t fit in the particular work environment. The objective, instead, should be for interviewers to look for ‘grace under fire,’ or the ability of applicants to juggle a multitude of disparate activities simultaneously.” For instance, what would an applicant do if he discovered half an hour before the veterinarian arrives on her scheduled herd check visit, that a milker did not show up and there is no one to take his shift and that the milk tank refrigeration is malfunctioning? “The idea is to see if the applicant has the ability to deal with details so you don’t miss deadlines, but also the ability to always see the big picture and not lose sight of the farm’s goals.”¹³

Although only one person will be hired, the rest will go back out into the community and talk about the farm and their experiences as an applicant. Anything that can be done to give applicants a positive experience throughout the selection process will pay off in the long run. Farmers who have a specific product or label, for instance, may give a sample to each

applicant to take home. One dairy farmer gave applicants gift certificates to the local dairy cooperative store where numerous varieties of cheese were sold.

Step 5: Check references

Reference checking involves obtaining information about applicants from previous employers. Meeting references in person or on the phone is usually more productive than asking them to respond in writing. Reference checks can supply important information about personality and character, and may even provide some legal protection.

For example, one employee who was sexually assaulted by a co-worker sued her employer. She contended that, had management done a more careful reference check when hiring the worker, his previous record of sexual assault would have come to light.¹⁴

Contacting several references increases your chances of getting an accurate picture of the applicant’s performance, in part because employers may not be entirely truthful when providing a reference. Some supervisors may even exaggerate the virtues of difficult employees to get them off their hands and speak poorly of those they wish to keep.

When checking references, it is common courtesy not to call an applicant’s present employer unless this individual (1) is seriously being considered for the position, and (2) has given permission. Calling a present employer can create challenges, too. A dairyman shared: “One of the better qualified people was talked out of taking



Offering the job to someone “because we’ve come this far” could result in costly consequences.

this position because his boss knew he was interested in making the move. I called his boss and . . . after I told him a little about the job he said, ‘he will do *your* job standing on his head, and I will tell you something else, I will do my best to keep him.’”¹⁵

Step 6: Conduct a final interview (if needed)

Even after following the steps described above, you may still have trouble making a decision. A final interview with the top two or three candidates can help resolve the dilemma. This final interview could be held formally or be part of another activity, such as dinner.

While the employer attempts to evaluate prospective applicants, it may be easy to forget that applicants are also forming impressions about the employer. From the first contact with potential applicants and throughout the selection process, those who interact with applicants need to be supportive. Whenever possible applicants’ self esteem should be built up. Certainly, farm employers should avoid humiliating participants because of what they do not know.

BRING NEW EMPLOYEE ABOARD

Dear Applicant:

Thank you for your interest in the farm manager position with our operation. We regret to inform you that you were not selected. There were over 12 applicants, and we could choose only one of the several well-qualified candidates. We enjoyed meeting you and were particularly impressed with your interpersonal and mechanical skills. Please keep us in mind in the future. Thanks again for your time and interest. We wish you well in your career.

Step 1: Make offers and convey rejections

Following a thorough selection process enables you to base a decision on substantial data rather than on intuition alone. It is *worth starting over* with the recruitment process if you are not satisfied with any of the applicants. Offering the job to someone “because we’ve come this far” could mean hiring the wrong person for the job.

Making a job offer can be rewarding. Both applicant and employer are usually excited about confirming that a position has been offered and accepted. If you plan to include a medical examination as part of the selection process, the job offer can be made conditional upon

passing a job-related physical (see Step 2).

When applicants and farm employer do not share the same language, a written offer of employment may be desirable. When offers are made orally, follow-up letters of confirmation help avoid misunderstandings. Additionally, although a starting salary and other working conditions may have been discussed, this is a good time to confirm these agreements.

Usually both parties want the new job to start immediately, but traditionally applicants are allowed to give their present employer advance notice of their departure (e.g., 2 weeks). Some workers may need additional time. It is unwise to pressure an individual to begin the job immediately. Such an employer may obtain compliance at the cost of good will. He may give the impression of being disorganized or unconcerned about employees.

Unfortunately, too often candidates who are not selected for a position never hear from the employer. Others may find out a position was filled when they see the new employee. In addition to common courtesy, a reason for promptly notifying all applicants is that farm employers may want to stay in touch with top contenders to fill future openings. Do not commit yourself to *calling* all the candidates and letting them know if they got the job or not. When you telephone candidates, this will raise their hopes only to be let down a moment later. I prefer to send letters or e-mails to those who were not selected. A thoughtful rejection letter might be worded along the lines of the one in Figure 2–3.

Despite all your efforts to ensure that the best worker is hired, it is still possible for unexpected challenges to develop. For instance, the chosen applicant may not accept the job offer. Perhaps the applicant’s current employer gave him a large raise to avoid losing him, or personal reasons kept him from taking the job.

If the new employee is not able to do part of the job as originally designed, he may be able to compensate in other

FIGURE 2–3

Sample rejection letter.

ways. These changes may need to be reflected in a revised job description.

At times it becomes obvious to both the new employee and farmer that the relationship will not work. For whatever reasons, a farm manager who loses the newly selected employee may still be able to attract one of the other top qualified contenders to avoid starting over at the recruitment stage.

Step 2: Oversee the post-offer pre-placement physical ability testing¹⁶

A well-planned physical and physical ability exams require that the examining physician and physical therapist understand the job requirements. Some doctors and therapists are willing to work closely with agricultural enterprises to develop a job-related physical examination. Tests of important factors such as blood cholinesterase level, hearing ability, lifting strength, and tolerance for wearing a respirator will be useful in making employment decisions. Data may also be important to managing workers' compensation as well as farm illness and injury programs. Denying employment merely because of a conceivable propensity to disease or injury—without any history of it—may raise ethical and legal questions as well.

Dr. Alexis Dasig, who practices occupational medicine at the Gould Medical Foundation in Modesto, California, explained: "Because of the physical demands of many jobs in agriculture, a pre-placement medical evaluation is a wise investment. A farm worker was sent to us after his second day on the job. He had hurt his back on the job and has been off for the past year now. I am sure [the employer is] spending thousands of dollars on workers' compensation. If he had been given a pre-employment physical, we might have discovered that he already had three chronic lower back problems and that he was not physically fit to perform that kind of work."¹⁷

Physical therapist, Lyle Andersen, also from Modesto, adds, "We perform a thorough muscle/skeletal/postural evaluation. While the participants lift

and carry progressively weighted objects we are evaluating fatigue levels and body mechanic issues. In cases where there is an accurate job analysis available, the individual will then be offered the opportunity to demonstrate safe lifting ability up to the documented maximum job requirement." Lyle notes that those who lift safely tend to maintain a straight back, bend their knees, and look forward. Those with poor lifting skills tend to compensate and utilize weaker muscles, such as those of the back.¹⁸

Farm employers may want to add pre-employment drug testing where labor laws permit it. One dairy worker confided, "Before I went clean on drugs a few years ago, I used to work all day and not even remember what I had done." It pays to wait until drug test results are back, however, before allowing an individual to start work. Reputable drug-testing firms using established and reliable procedures should be contracted. It could be problematic to reject an applicant who had never used drugs on the basis of a false positive test result.

Drug testing is more accepted—and may even be required by law—when

Seldom in their careers will employees be so pliable or receptive to change as during their orientation period.



A comprehensive employee selection process does not guarantee the selection of the right person, but it does help avoid many common mistakes.



personnel must operate dangerous equipment or are in a position to harm others. Normally, employers are not challenged for conducting pre-employment drug testing. Once workers are on the job, however, employers are expected to balance employee privacy rights against safety considerations.

Random drug testing for those on the job is usually not as well-accepted except in high responsibility positions where people's lives are at stake. Testing people who have either been involved in an accident, or near accident, or seem under the influence is often considered more necessary. It is important to think ahead of time about what measures will be taken if employees fail the test. Will they be terminated or sent to a drug

rehabilitation program? Often, these circumstances present an opportunity to help employees overcome drug addiction, as long as the farm employer makes it clear that a single misstep in the future will result in termination.

Step 3: Conduct orientation

Seldom in their careers will employees be so pliable or receptive to change as during their orientation period. This is particularly true when such changes have been clearly outlined through a realistic job preview. Farmers can plan the orientation to take full advantage of this phenomenon.

In psychological terms, new personnel go through a "thawing" period, in which they are receptive to

SIDEBAR: 2–3

Can you trust the Selection Interview?

During a three-day workshop on agricultural labor management, presenters focused extensively on the selection of farm personnel. During the last day of the seminar, class participants were divided into groups and had the opportunity to work on their interviewing skills.

The assignment for each of the four groups was to first come up with a basic description of a farm operation and then consider effective interview questions. Each group would have the opportunity to interview four separate equipment operator candidates. The assignment required a ranking of each equipment operator from best to worst.

While these farm managers and mid-level supervisors prepared for the interview, I met with the four ‘applicants.’ It was clear to all that they were not applying for a real job, but were helping us out in the seminar. Two of the equipment operators had been lent to us by neighboring farmers while the other two were employees of the large agricultural cooperative where the seminar was held. I knew that one of these two men only drove a tractor to empty garbage bins and do other like assignments at the plant. As I met with all four operators, I suggested to them, “Don’t be afraid to have fun here, and play the role of someone applying for a job. Feel free to make up any information you want to.”

When the interviews were concluded, one candidate rose as the clear choice among three of the four groups, and the second choice of the remaining group. All four groups quickly and independently came to the same conclusion about the man who drove a tractor mostly to empty the garbage in the plant, and placed him at the bottom of the list as the least desirable. So much for my instructions “To have fun,” I thought. This candidate had been candid about his experience.

The first surprise came when I asked the seminar participants if now that they had ranked the equipment operators, if they would like to know how the equipment operators ranked each group. As I have carried out this little experiment in many nations over the years, it is clear that while farm employers are interviewing applicants, these applicants are in turn evaluating the farm employers, too.

The groups that score well with applicants tend to: (1) have all members of the interviewing team ask questions; (2) allow the applicant to speak more than the interviewers; (3) ask difficult questions but allow applicants to save face if they do not know the answer; (4) listen to and attend carefully to the applicant rather than allow themselves to be distracted or get bored; (5) have a sense of humor, while being respectful; (6) encourage applicants to ask questions; and (7) seem to be united in purpose and not at odds with each other.

While the interviews were taking place, another group of class participants were outside developing a course to use as a practical test of driving skills. They had situated bins in the place of fruit trees, and had spaced them in rows as if we were out in an orchard. Candidates were asked to back their tractor and implement down the road between orchard blocks, and then back up into a specific row.

The tractor operator who had refused to exaggerate his experience for the role play did a better job than any of us expected. The real surprise came, however, when the second applicant who had been provided by the farm cooperative had his turn. He had been the clear choice in the morning, after the interviews. Now, it turned out, he was having a great deal of trouble maneuvering the tractor without hitting the bins that represented fruit trees.

The cooperative had not told me that he was their truck driver, rather than an orchard equipment operator. Yet he had managed to come across so

SIDEBAR: 2–3 (CONTINUED)

Can you trust the Selection Interview?

well in the interview that most groups had selected him as their first choice. I began to look at the faces of disbelief of the participants. “It must be the tractor,” some suggested.

“We want to see him drive the other tractor,” they proposed. The driver did just as poorly with the second tractor.

One of the axioms of employee selection is that interviewers look for information to help prove their perspective, and tend to discard information that contradicts it.

Practical tests are a much better predictor of on-the-job performance than interviews, or any other type of selection instrument. When practical tests are combined with other selection tools, including a trial period, farm employers have the best combination of possible tools.

new ideas and new ways of doing things. The very step of looking for a new job often means applicants are receptive to change. A new hire may act readily on a suggestion to take classes at the local community college, for instance, even after resisting the same idea a year earlier.

During this period, workers can make a successful transition into supervisory work. A person who has never been in a leadership position might have to adjust her thinking to that of a manager. Employees can learn to be part of a committed team that contributes to decision making.

Employees will be especially receptive to a farmer’s working philosophy during the orientation period. Farmers must strike a balance between philosophical indoctrination and allowing new workers to learn about the job by trying it. Discussions should be brief, or the worker will have trouble remembering everything supervisors say.

Instructions that seem clear to the farm manager may not be to a new worker, especially one overloaded with information. After a week or two, farm employers can review the information with new hires. Avoid negative comments about a previous or present employee.

Unwritten rules, traditions or informal perks should be discussed with employees as part of the orientation period. For instance, an employee may resent doing a job that requires driving his own vehicle to town, not knowing

that the farm employer expects to be charged mileage for the effort.

Co-workers also realize that the orientation period can be used to gain the sympathy of a new worker. Some workers will attempt to “orient” employees to their way of thinking. Others may engage in hazing. Such activities can be destructive, even leading new employees to quit. Anti-hazing policies and assigning new employees a respected mentor may help. These established workers can help orient new hires to their jobs, to other co-workers, and to the work environment through a continuing informal relationship.

Test and interview results can be analyzed so that a comprehensive training and development plan can be drawn up. New employees should be exposed to as wide an array of tasks as practical, within their job description, early on in their careers. It is especially important that they are exposed to potentially undesirable aspects of the job early on to avoid surprises in the future.

Even before new personnel arrive for their first day at work, they may need information about such things as local banks, housing, utilities, and community activities. If it is available and applicable, supplying information about children’s schooling, possible jobs for a working spouse, or community activities can be helpful, though some applicants will prefer to investigate these matters on their own.

A checklist of items to be discussed during the orientation period is useful. It

should clearly outline management expectations and help answer typical questions asked by new employees.

You may also want to take new personnel out to eat and to meet community members at the local hangout. Building a good working relationship is a long-term endeavor. The orientation period provides key opportunities towards this end.

If a probationary period is set up before the employee is hired, it needs to be structured so an employer does not feel forced to make a pass/fail decision at the end of such a period. A probationary period is most useful when the employer allows for extending the probation when warranted. Such an evaluation needs to take place before the probationary period expires (see Chapter 21).

SUMMARY

Farmers need to understand the skills and abilities that are required in a particular job and determine which candidates have those capabilities. Interviews, reference checks, tests, applications, and *résumés* can all help identify differences among candidates. When effectively designed, practical tests are the *most powerful* tool for the selection of *any* farm employee—yet they are also the most neglected. The comprehensive process described here does not guarantee the selection of the right person, but it does help avoid many common mistakes. Farm employers can make their selection decisions with a fuller awareness of the applicants' strengths and weaknesses. Combined with a good orientation period, careful selection enables the employer and new personnel to start out on a positive path.

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