

Finding Applicants in a Tight Labor Market

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As a dairy farm employer, you must compete aggressively for job applicants. An inadequate number of applicants leads to a shortage of quality employees. These quality employees are essential to the accomplishment of your production, financial and growth goals. Lack of quality employees jeopardizes the very future of your business.

Your challenge is to provide jobs that are attractive to people who have employment alternatives in the non-farm labor market, i.e., you must do better than simply drawing from the ranks of the unemployed. Your depending primarily on people looking for something temporary until a better job comes along guarantees a never-ending employee headache.

Generating applicants is step 3 of an eight-step process:

1. Determine the labor and management needs of the business that the new employee will help satisfy
2. Develop a job description based on the needs
3. Build a pool of applicants
4. Review applications and select those to be interviewed
5. Interview
6. Check references
7. Make a selection
8. Hire

All eight steps are important. Mediocre performance in any one of the eight steps can lead to a continuous shortage of labor, disappointing employees, labor inefficiency and frustrated managers.

Finding applicants requires some key background work followed by choice of the right methods for your situation.

Background Steps for Success in Attracting Applicants

Getting ready to seek applicants is at least as important as what you do later. You must give yourself a chance to succeed. The following guidelines provide both a checklist of your current practices and the changes you may need for success. Many of these steps require long-run commitment. Some may require changes in who is responsible for generating applicants and the knowledge and skills the person has.

Design Jobs With Employees in Mind

Boring jobs cause problems. Employers can capitalize on employees' interests and the advantages they see in farm work. People who love animals are motivated by the opportunity to work with animals. Some people like machinery much more than animals. Some enjoy repairing machinery more than operating it. Some people like office work; others want to be outdoors.

Managers have the primary responsibility for designing jobs. They first need to take into consideration the tasks that must be accomplished for the farm to succeed. They can also take into consideration what individuals want in their jobs. Sometimes minor changes in job design can dramatically improve an employee's view of a job, e.g., changing a calf feeder's job to include, or no longer include, explanation of calf care to farm visitors. Another example is asking the employee to work closely with the veterinarian to improve calf health.

Job design cannot overcome the fact that no job is perfect. Farm jobs have some disadvantages managers need to address when designing jobs. Each of the following job characteristics responds to often stated disadvantages of farm work: reasonable number of work hours per day and per week, proper equipment in good repair, well lighted and ventilated work areas, training, some flexibility in scheduling work hours and regular communication with the supervisor.

Anticipating what will help motivate employees is important in job design. First, design jobs whenever possible to encourage employees to use a variety of skills. Remember that many people consider assembly line jobs to be boring. Standing in one place using only one or two skills doing the same thing repeatedly is not satisfying for most people. One reason that many workers like varied work is that they get to use a variety of skills.

Second, design jobs whenever possible so that an employee does a total job, e.g., all aspects of calf raising as contrasted with just feeding or a milker position that includes more responsibilities than just milking. Even such a simple task as repairing gates may be more satisfying if one person has the responsibility to do everything including determining what parts are needed, buying parts, taking the gate apart, replacing parts, reassembling and testing to be sure everything is in order.

Third, design jobs so that the employee understands the significance of his or her job to the farm. Why is milking important? Why is calf raising important? What contribution is the person making by doing a good job with dry cows? What problems are caused later on if calves are not given proper care? An employee should have answers to these kinds of basic questions.

Fourth, design jobs so that each employee has responsibility, challenge, freedom and the opportunity to be creative. This requires you to delegate some authority. Delegation can be a powerful tool for improving a job. "You can do the job however you

want as long as you get the necessary results.” Such words, delegation, and responsibility can have positive impacts on employees.

Finally, make feedback a part of job design. Well-designed jobs anticipate the need for communication. Most employees want to know what is expected of them, how they are doing, how they can improve, what latitude they have in changing how they do their tasks, what should be discussed with a supervisor and when the discussion should occur. Employees rarely complain about too much communication with their supervisor. They often want more communication.

Like, Enjoy and Appreciate Employees

You have an interpersonal relationship with your employees. Your attitude toward employees can have a great impact on the relationship. Employees easily sense the extent to which their employer likes, enjoys and appreciates them. Attitudes are not fixed. You chose what attitude to have about employees.

Build a Reputation in the Community as an Outstanding Place to Work

A reputation as an outstanding place to work is a powerful asset for generating a pool of applicants. Qualified people driving in your driveway asking to be considered the next time you have an opening is reputation working to your huge advantage.

The need is apparent to build a reputation of being an excellent place to work. Actually building the reputation is a long-term challenge that you must face with creativity, imagination and confidence. The good news is that each employer owns his or her reputation in the community. Each employer’s reputation is personal. Two farms may look alike, raise the same crops or have similar livestock. Yet they can have very different reputations as a place to work.

How can an individual farmer build a reputation that employees find attractive? Following is a list of guidelines from which to pick and chose strategies, policies and practices for building a positive reputation.

Use Written Job Descriptions - Employees like to know what they have been hired to do. As responsibilities change, they like to have an explicit understanding with their supervisor.

Provide Training - Provide training for employees so that they can do well what they have been hired to do. Few people enjoy doing what they cannot do well. Training is an investment in people. A willingness to make this investment in employees helps build a positive image among employees and others in the community.

Show Trust - Show trust in employees by delegating authority and responsibility to them. The delegation helps satisfy their sense of self-worth.

Catch People Doing Things Right - Catch people doing things right and say thank you. Performance appraisals that emphasize the positive help build the employer's reputation. Sharing your positive thoughts paves the way for suggestions on how the employee can improve. Employers who harp on what people do wrong build a wall of distrust between themselves and their employees.

Develop Pride in Your Business - Building widespread pride among your employees is a long-term effort. Visitors to the farm and feature stories in the local media can help. Attractive hats with the farm name and jackets with employee names can help. The hats and jackets say to the community that employees are glad to be part of your farm team.

Celebrate Successes - Celebrate the farm's successes. For farms to succeed, people need to work together. People who work together like to join together to celebrate their accomplishments.

Communicate Clearly and Often - Employees prefer open and regular communication. Employees rarely complain about too much communication.

Compensate Fairly - Fairness of compensation matters more than the dollar amount. The compensation should be fair when compared to what employees could earn with other employers. The compensation should also be fair when compared to what co-workers with similar responsibilities are earning.

Provide Exceptional Monetary Benefits - Total compensation includes both cash wages and monetary benefits such as health insurance; paid vacation; paid sick leave; retirement programs; housing and utilities; uniforms; overtime pay and pay differentials for holidays, third shift and weekends. Employees expect ordinary benefits. They recognize exceptional benefits as a special advantage.

Provide Extraordinary Informal Benefits - Farm employers can also boost their reputations as employers by offering creative informal benefits and rewards. Informal rewards have either no out-of-pocket dollar cost or are a small part of total compensation. Some examples are: birthday cards sent to children of employees; attending all weddings, baptisms and birthday parties to which you are invited by employees; taking a course in the language spoken by non-English speaking employees; hiring a photographer to take pictures of each employee's family; personally greeting each employee each day; seeking out an employee just to say thank you; offering an employee of the year award with the recipient chosen by other employees; asking employees to explain to farm visitors what they do and why it is important; and giving an especially deserving employee tickets to a major sporting event or concert.

Promote from Within - Promoting from within recognizes past contributions and shows the employer's confidence in the employee. It also sends a signal to other employees that they have career advancement opportunities without changing employers.

Make the Business Family-friendly - Making the farm family-friendly means paying attention to the family responsibilities that frustrate employees. More important, it means helping them deal with their family responsibilities.

Be Proud of Advancing Employees - Be proud when outstanding employees leave to advance their careers. Losing an outstanding employee is often disappointing. Nevertheless, be sure the employee leaves with a positive attitude.

Be Ready to Receive Applications

You should be ready for telephone calls or visits from potential applicants. Each applicant should be asked to fill out an application form. Taking time to develop an application form or modify one used previously forces identification of important characteristics to look for in applicants. An application form provides a common base of information about all employees being considered. It also provides an important source of questions to be followed up on during interviews. The application form should include an agreement section signed by the applicant which gives permission to check references, makes clear that false information on the application form can be basis for dismissal and that the employment is at-will.

Methods to Attract Applicants

After you have given careful attention to the background work needed for success in attracting applicants, you are ready to select the methods you will use. The five methods most likely to attract applicants are: welcoming walk-ins, writing creative help wanted ads, seeking applications from students, offering incentives to current employees and using the Internet.

Welcome Walk Ins

Walk-ins come to the farm asking to apply for a job. They may come not knowing whether you are hiring. A steady flow of walk-ins wanting to apply suggests that you have a reputation as a good place to work. It is especially encouraging when people employed elsewhere walk in wanting to apply.

Walk-ins often learn about your openings by word of mouth. Your current employees, neighbors, agribusiness contacts, veterinarians and consultants are examples of people who may be encouraging qualified people to contact you. Word of mouth is fast and low cost. However, it limits the scope of the job search because qualified applicants may not know about the specific opportunities provided by your positions. Only the very best employers can depend on walk-ins alone for their applicants.

Write Creative Help Wanted Ads

Help wanted ads can be placed in newspapers and magazines read by potential employees. Help wanted ads have the potential of expanding the applicant pool beyond the local community. The ads may increase the pool of applicants to the point that screening based on their application forms will be necessary.

Only creative and well-prepared help wanted ads are likely to be effective in a tight job market. People skip over mediocre ads after having read a couple of creative ads. The following eight steps will help you write effective want ads:

1. Lead with a striking statement or job characteristic that attracts attention
2. Give the job title
3. Say something positive about your current employees
4. Say something positive about your business and the dairy industry
5. Describe the job
6. Explain qualifications necessary for success in the position
7. Provide information on wages and benefits, as appropriate
8. Say how to apply for the job.

Two traditional and easily prepared help wanted ads illustrate the results of a haphazard approach:

Wanted: Full-time milker. Call 888-9953.

*Help wanted - Experienced and reliable person needed for farm work.
Call 888-9953.*

These unexciting ads cost little to run in a local newspaper. Their huge disadvantage is ineffectiveness. Traditional ads that do little to sell a job or the business attract few if any high quality applicants.

Following the eight steps for effective want ads results in nontraditional ads such as these:

Looking for a change? Like animals but not available for a full-time job? Want to join a group of positive and fun people? We are a modern family business specializing in the wonderful dairy industry. We are looking for an ambitious individual to help care for our young livestock. You can start at 9:00 a.m. and be home with your family by 3:00. No experience needed - excellent training provided. Competitive wages and benefits. Weekend work optional. Submit your application at Isabella's Dairy, two miles south of McClure on Route 65. Thursday-Saturday 4:00 p.m.- 6:00 p.m.

Want to join a winning team? We are accepting applications for assistant manager of a modern, efficient dairy farm. Responsibilities include training and supervising two dedicated full-time and four part-time employees, equipment operation and maintenance, and other production related responsibilities. Previous farm experience, employee supervision and farm equipment operation desirable. Our excellent training program will help you succeed in this position. Attractive wage and fringe benefit package including health insurance. Call Jacob, Farm Manager at Isabella's Dairy, 613-888-9953.

Seek Applications from Students

Some dairy farm employers have the good fortune of being located near a university, college, technical school or high school with teachers committed to helping their best students find meaningful part-time employment.

Many of today's students have part-time employment. Their objectives are money and employment experience. Dairy farm employment can strengthen their resumes and applications for full-time employment and advanced study. Some students have the potential to become outstanding employees even though most will have had no previous dairy farm experience. They rarely have full understanding of the excellent part-time jobs offered by some dairy farms. Your challenge, therefore, is to design jobs attractive to students that fit their schedules.

In addition to designing jobs attractive to students, you must find ways of communicating your opportunities. Each of the following can help: creative want ads in newspapers read by students, your reputation among teachers and school personnel having influence on students, your reputation among your current and previous student employees and your farm's web page on the Internet.

Offering Incentives to Current Employees

Your happy employees can attract applicants. They may have family and friends who qualify for your positions. How can you involve them?

Your employees need first to know in explicit terms that you welcome their help in attracting applicants. Involvement takes some of their time and puts their goodwill with family and friends on the line. Rewards can kick your employees into action. The opportunity to earn say a \$500 bonus does not come along every day. You might pay \$200 if a person recommended by an employee is hired, another \$200 if the person is still employed on your farm after three months and a final \$100 if the person stays a full year.

Employees need to understand the incentive system and what you are asking them to do. Explain the system in writing and provide all employees with a copy. Assure

them that you are committed to prompt payment of the incentives. Provide written job descriptions to your employees for all open positions. They need to know what a job does and does not include and the qualifications necessary to qualify for the position.

Seek input from your employees before implementing the incentive system. Help them feel ownership for the applicant problem and the means used to address the problem. Help them understand how they and the farm benefit from a full force of competent people.

Use the Internet

Many young people think first of the Internet, not help wanted ads, when seeking information about employment opportunities. A web page for your farm can easily include a section on employment opportunities and even an application form. Encourage potential applicants to contact you by e-mail should they seek additional information about your positions.

Summary

Lack of qualified applicants has become a major problem for most small businesses. The high quality employees you want and must have are likely employed elsewhere. The tight labor market challenges you to go beyond the traditional tools of walk-ins, help wanted ads and luck to find applicants. The long-term keys to success include designing jobs with employees in mind, liking and appreciating employees, building a reputation in your community as an outstanding place to work and being ready to receive potential applicants who visit, call, write or find you on the Internet. You have several methods available for attracting applicants: welcoming walk-ins, writing creative help wanted ads, seeking applications from students, offering incentives to current employees and using the Internet

The bad news is that you will face the applicant challenge as long as you are in business. The good news is that you can make it one of your management strengths.