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Recruiting, Selecting and Hiring Employees for Swine Farms: Pork Industry Handbook
Michigan State University Extension Service
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pork industry handbook

Michigan State University Extension

Recruiting, Selecting and Hiring Employees for Swine Farms

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Pork producers face a major challenge in finding and keeping quality employees. Finding quality employees is absolutely necessary if profitability, growth, and excellent goals are to be reached. Family members and existing employees are unable to cover for missing employees for any extended period of time. Finding employees can become an urgent or even a critical problem threatening the future of the business.

No simple or even complex recipe guarantees hiring success. Luck is not the answer. The employer who seems lucky in always finding high-quality people rarely is in fact lucky. Instead, such producers are depending on carefully made plans and a reputation as an excellent employer that has been patiently built. The answer lies in each pork producer developing a plan for filling positions.

The following eight step process for filling a position can be the foundation for a successful hiring plan.

Steps for Filling a Position

1. Determine the labor and management needs of the farm business that the new employee is expected to address.
2. Develop a current 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.

Step 1 - Determine the Labor and Management Needs.

What the business needs rather than what an applicant likes to do should guide the hiring process. An understanding of the goals for the farm business and its current and long-run constraints to progress will help in identifying desirable characteristics for employees. Goals and performance standards for areas with which the employee will have direct contact should be specifically addressed. This should happen before commencing the search for a new employee or starting a training program. This helps identify those specific things expected to be accomplished through hired farm workers in general and new employees in particular. For example, if an objective is to decrease repair costs, one alternative is to look for a person who has excellent mechanical skills. Another alternative is to hire an inexperienced person who has a willingness and desire to master new skills. A follow-up training program for such a person can result in a high-quality employee.

Skipping this step and "hiring the first person in the driveway" is risky. It means that a fit between what the farm needs and what the new employee brings to the job is left to chance.

Sometimes a pork producer is desperate for an employee. Taking time to think about the farm's needs seems unrealistic. The only way the pork producer can assure time for this step is to have backup labor already available and trained. The backup labor helps the farm through tight periods without forcing a hiring decision out of desperation.

Step 2 - Develop a Current Job Description Based on the Needs Identified in Step 1.

Job descriptions help both the employer and potential employees by answering three questions: What does the job holder do? How is it done? Under what conditions is it done? The job description has at least four parts:

1. Job title;
2. A brief one or two sentence summary of the job;
3. A listing of the major tasks involved in the job summarized under three to seven general headings; and
4. A listing of the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to do the job.

Job descriptions may include other information such as the supervisor, who is supervised by the person in the position, pay range, required licenses or certificates, and location of the job.

Job descriptions are typically one page long. The brevity requires a terse, direct writing style. Simple words with single meanings should be used. Action verbs in the present tense should be used in defining the job duties, e.g., power washes farrowing crates; completes a performance evaluation at least annually for each employee supervised. The specifics of the job should be clear from the job description. The job title, job summary, and description of duties should be completely consistent. To illustrate, the job title of herd manager is inconsistent with a list of job duties that includes only routine work tasks such as cleaning, feeding, moving, loading, and repairing.

Step 3 - Build a Pool of Applicants.

Although there are many methods of getting job applicants, word-of-mouth and help wanted ads are likely to generate the most applicants. Word-of-mouth involves current employees, neighbors, agribusiness contacts, veterinarians, and others who come in contact with potential employees. Word of mouth is fast and low cost. However, it limits the scope of the job search because qualified applicants may not hear about the position. Current employees may quickly become advocates for relatives and friends.

The farm's reputation as an outstanding place to work is a powerful asset for generating a pool of applicants. Qualified people asking to fill out applications so they can be considered by the pork producer the next time there is an opening is word-of-mouth working at its best.

Help wanted ads can be placed in newspapers and magazines known to be 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 well prepared and creative help wanted ads are likely to be effective in a tight job market. Other employers are working at least as hard as pork producers to attract quality applicants. Following a seven-step process should result in an effective want ad:

1. Lead with a positive statement or job characteristic that attracts attention.
2. Give the job title.
3. Say something positive about the farm.
4. Describe the job.

5. Explain qualifications necessary for success in the position.
6. Provide information on wages and benefits, as appropriate.
7. Say how to apply for the job.

Two traditional and easily prepared help wanted ads illustrate what results when these seven steps are not followed:

Wanted: Full-time worker for hog farm. Call 888-9953.

Experienced and reliable person needed for general work on a swine farm. Call 888-9953.

These ads have the advantage of costing little to run in a local newspaper. Their huge disadvantage is ineffectiveness. Traditional ads that do little to sell a job or the farm are unlikely to attract high-quality applicants.

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

Looking for a change? Like farm work and animals but not long hours? We are a modern food producer specializing in pork and 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 4:00. No experience needed - excellent training provided. Competitive wages, benefits and five work days per week. Submit your application at Sunrise Farms, Thursday-Saturday 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.

Want to join a winning team? We are accepting applications for assistant farm manager of a modern, efficient swine farm. Responsibilities include training and supervising two full-time and four part-time employees, harvest equipment operation and maintenance, and other production related responsibilities. Previous swine 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 Kendra, Farm Manager at Valley Wide Farms, 613-888-9953.

The employer 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 follow-up questions to be asked during the interview. 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.

Step 4 - Review Applications and Select Those to be Interviewed.

Some applicants will be excluded from further consideration based on the application form. A pre-interview also can be used to help identify applicants to be invited for a formal interview. Having interested people visit the farm to fill out an application form can provide opportunity for a few general questions about experience and interest in the job. Promising candidates can be given a mini-tour of the farm providing an opportunity for general conversation about farming, livestock, the swine industry, farm work, and machinery. The objective of the pre-selection step is to reduce the applicant pool to the most promising candidates.

No fewer than three people should be left in the applicant pool. You may not be successful in hiring the best person in the pool of applicants. Interviewing may dramatically change the pre-ranking of applicants you have made. Also, some applicants will withdraw. Most important, the person hired should know that he or she is a winner having been selected over other qualified people.

Step 5 - Interview.

The following questions need to be addressed in preparation for interviewing:

1. Who will be on the interview team?
2. How will time be divided between the formal interview and informal discussion including a visit of the farmstead?
3. What questions will be asked in the interview?
4. How will interview evaluations be recorded?
5. Where will the interview be conducted?

Preparing a list of questions before the interview is critical to interview success. Avoid questions that can be answered yes or no. Instead of yes/no type questions, use open-ended questions that encourage applicants to explain experiences, characteristics, and ideas in their own words. The open-ended questions should be geared toward the following general areas: previous job accomplishments and achievements, non-job accomplishments and achievements, motivation and ambition, hobbies and use of leisure time, and "what if" questions. "What if" questions are based on practical real-world problem situations. The intent is to discover how the applicant would handle the real-world problem.

The basic list of questions asked should be the same for each potential employee, so all applicants can be compared using the same criteria.

Do not ask questions about: race, color, religion, national origin, marital status, number and care of dependents, height, weight, education unrelated to the job, friends or relatives who have previously worked on your farm, age, arrest records, U.S. citizenship, disabilities, person to notify in case of emergency, sexual orientation, nonbusiness-related references, social clubs and organizations, and military experience in the armed forces of another country. A general guideline is to ask only about those things that are unquestionably related to the job and any applicant's ability to do the job.

It is possible to get necessary information without asking improper questions. It is legitimate to ask about availability for work on weekends and staying late during planting and harvest seasons. However, these questions should not be asked in terms of family responsibilities,

children, or religious practice. It is important to know if an applicant is a U.S. citizen or whether the applicant meets immigration law requirements. These questions can be asked without reference to national origin.

Once you have selected the interviewing team and planned the interview, you are ready to interview the people selected in Step 4. The interview can be divided into the following nine steps:

1. Relax the applicant and build rapport (2-3 minutes).
2. Give the applicant a copy of the job description and describe the job in considerable detail (3-5 minutes).
3. Determine the accuracy of the information on the application form (4-7 minutes).
4. Ask a series of open-ended questions previously prepared (10-15 minutes).
5. Encourage the applicant to ask questions (2-5 minutes).
6. Summarize your farm's mission, objectives, and business philosophy (2-4 minutes).
7. Summarize the opportunities provided to the person in the position (2-4 minutes).
8. Encourage the applicant to ask questions (2-10 minutes).
9. Close with information about plans for making a decision (2-4 minutes).

The interview should typically take about 30 minutes. The times suggested in parentheses can be adjusted for shorter or longer interviews.

The content, importance, and intent of each step should be thoroughly understood before beginning interviews.

Relax the applicant and build rapport. Although this step should take no more than 2-3 minutes, it is important to all the steps that follow in the interview. The objective is to set the stage for a friendly and open exchange of information. Your smile and warm welcome are important. Possible discussion topics include the weather, any difficulty in finding the farm, a school attended by both interviewer and interviewee, or a friendly dog who enthusiastically greets all visitors. Confirming that the applicant has parked in the right place may be helpful. Maintain a casual and non-interview atmosphere during this step.

Give the applicant a copy of the job description and describe the job in considerable detail. It is essential that the applicant understand the job you are filling. Do not depend on general terms like working with hogs, taking care of pigs, driving tractor, and general farm work. The meanings of these terms vary substantially from farm to farm. Be specific about the duties and responsibilities.

Determine the accuracy of the information on the application form. Review the applicant's training directly required for performance of the job, job experience directly related to the position you are filling, and gaps of time between jobs. Pay particular attention to career progress from one job to the next and vague reasons for leaving previous positions.

Ask a series of open-ended questions previously prepared. Your careful preparation for the interview should be apparent to the applicant. Avoid groping for the next question to ask. Impress the applicant with your ability to ask questions that are fun to answer. You are conducting an interview not an interrogation. Embarrassing and stressing applicants is unnecessary.

Encourage the applicant to ask questions. Note that thus far in the interview, the applicant has been responding. At this point, the applicant is given explicit encouragement to ask questions. Be patient in allowing time for the applicant to get his or her questions formulated and asked. You should answer the questions in a straightforward manner. Note carefully the content of the applicant's questions, the insight shown, and follow-up questions when pursuing a particular point. Pay careful attention to hints about the career and personal needs the applicant hopes to satisfy through the job.

Summarize your farm's mission, objectives, and business philosophy. This is a "selling" step. You want the applicant to have a positive impression of your business even if an offer will not be forthcoming. Take time to explain the uniqueness of your business, the importance of people in accomplishing your goals (how people can progress and how performance is evaluated), and your vision of the opportunities in agriculture in general and the swine industry in particular. Also explain the pride you have in former employees who have moved up in the industry.

Summarize the opportunities provided to the person in the position. You now turn from the general summary about the farm business to a specific summary about the position you are filling. This is also a "selling" step. It is appropriate to again explain the importance of the position to the success of your business, the opportunities provided to learn the necessary skills for success, and the satisfaction that can be gained through the position.

Encourage the applicant to ask questions. This second opportunity for the applicant to ask questions should be used to emphasize your desire to be an open and effective communicator. Show your caring attitude. The applicant may have thought of additional questions or now have the courage to ask questions that earlier seemed too daring. This second opportunity for the applicant to ask questions further encourages the applicant to interview you instead of just being interviewed by you.

Close with information about plans for making a decision. Be specific about what happens next, when you will complete applicant interviews and when you plan to be in touch with the applicant. Be sure the applicant does not leave guessing about the next step.

Be careful not to raise unrealistic expectations for the applicant. Simply express appreciation for the applicant's time, provide your name and telephone number, and welcome personal contacts with you should the applicant have any questions.

Interviewing is difficult. Knowing how to do it well makes it enjoyable. Some do's and don'ts can serve as reminders on how to improve your interviewing skills.

Do:

1. Make sure the applicant does most of the talking.
2. Make the interview fun for you and the applicant.
3. Listen!!!
4. Be attentive.
5. Concentrate on the interview and what is being said.
6. Show enthusiasm throughout the interview.
7. "Read" non-verbal messages.
8. Show appreciation for the person being interested in the position.
9. Show pride in your business, agriculture, and the swine industry.
10. Stay in control of the interview.

Do Not:

1. Project the answer you want from the applicant, e.g., "You do like pigs don't you."
2. Cut an interview short because the first ten minutes did not go well.
3. Let your note taking during the interview detract from the "flow" of the interview.
4. Read questions to the applicant.
5. Let your facial expressions and other non-verbal responses show your dissatisfaction with the applicant's answers.
6. Add a series of follow-up questions to explore "interesting" side issues.
7. Allow an aggressive applicant to ignore your questions and talk about things not on your agenda.
8. Go into the interviews with the intention of simply confirming that a pre-interview favorite is in fact the best candidate for the position.

Step 6 - Check References.

References can confirm information gathered in steps 1-5 and provide additional information about those applicants who are still being given serious consideration. Some employers skip this step because of previous employers' reluctance to share any useful information out of fear of defamation charges.

Reference checks can still be productive. Personal visits or telephone conversations will be more productive than asking for written comments. Getting references from your personal acquaintances or from people well known in pork production circles will be more productive than asking strangers. Asking about the most important contribution the employee has made is likely to be more

helpful than asking if the reference knows of any reason you should not hire the person. A reference's tone of voice may communicate more than the words being said. Asking references provided by the applicant to suggest other people to contact can result in additional useful information.

Keep in mind that some references have reason to give less than candid information. Some employers may praise a problem employee in hopes that another employer will hire away the person. On the other hand, some employers may hint at problems in hopes of preventing you from making an offer to one of their outstanding employees.

Asking the same carefully prepared questions of each reference will be helpful. Using a structured form can greatly simplify recording information received from references.

Step 7 - Make a Selection.

Strive to be as objective as possible given the job description; knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to do the job; and the information available concerning each applicant. If no satisfactory applicant is found, start the process over rather than take a chance on a doubtful applicant.

Selection biases can easily creep into the selection process. Five potentially important selection biases are:

- 1. Stereotyping:** Attributing certain characteristics to a particular group of people. "People who grew up on livestock farms like animals."
- 2. Halo effect:** Regarding highly an individual who has characteristics you particularly like. "A person, like me, who drives a Ford, loves country music, and is a Chicago Cubs fan will be a good employee."
- 3. First Impressions:** Judging prematurely based on appearance, handshake, or voice. "He has a good firm handshake, a friendly smile, no earrings, and short hair. I knew before the interview started that he would be a good employee."
- 4. Contrast:** Measuring against the last person interviewed. "After that last person we interviewed, I had begun to think we would never be able to find a good person."
- 5. Staleness:** Discounting those interviewed early and favoring a person interviewed just before the selection is made.

Step 8 - Hire a Person.

Make an oral offer in person or by telephone to your first choice followed by a written offer that summarizes the key conditions of employment. In making the offer, emphasize that the applicant is the first choice among several qualified people. Show enthusiasm over the hope that this person will soon be joining your farm team.

The written employment agreement can be a letter of explanation or a form with blanks filled in as appropriate. Whatever the form, the agreement should include a description of the job, a statement that the employment is "at will," and an explanation of compensation, benefits, work schedules, and any other important details.

Notify unsuccessful candidates that another person has been hired and that all applications will be kept on file for six months.

Summary

"This is all nice but... I don't have enough time to follow all these steps."

"This is all nice but... I don't know how to do all these things you say are necessary."

"This is all nice but... I only need the Ford of interviewing not the Cadillac you have described."

"This is all nice but... I don't know any pork producer who pays this much attention to filling a position."

The recipe for farm success is complex. Animals, equipment, financing, land, and buildings matter a great deal. People also matter. To a great extent, pork producers reach their goals through people. Getting things done through people requires competent employees. Mediocrity in filling positions can make a huge difference over time. To have competent employees, people who have the potential of being competent need to be hired. The question is: Do I maximize my chances of hiring the "right" people or do I leave my success to chance? Each pork producer answers this question directly or indirectly and then lives with the answer.



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