2015

Employee management: the job interview, and what questions can I ask?

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Farmers must also remember the impact of tillage on their rotation choices. They should also remember impacts that will go beyond the farm gate. Excess nitrogen is a source of water pollution and corn uses more nitrogen.

Table 4: Yield Advantage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corn Prices</th>
<th>Soybean Prices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$6.00</td>
<td>$11.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$6.50</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$7.00</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$7.50</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Employees can still ask about other work experience. Find out what kinds of challenges they have faced in previous employment, and how they handled it. Some questions might be:

- Tell me about a job you had that you didn’t like. What didn’t you like about it? How did you deal with that?
- Tell me about a job duty in the past that you really enjoyed. What did you like about it? Why?
- Think about work supervisors you have had in the past. Was there someone that you really enjoyed working for? Why?

Some of your new employees may have a great deal to learn about working on a farm. Try to get an idea how they will approach learning new tasks.

- What do you do when you need to learn something new?
- Tell me about something new that you learned to do in the past two years, and how you went about learning that new skill.
- Have you ever helped someone to learn to do a new task? Did you enjoy that? How did you go about it?

Some employers make the mistake of spending most of the interview talking, instead of listening.
While it is important to make an outline of vital information that should be shared with potential employees, it is important to spend time listening to candidates. Don’t do all the talking at the interview.

One of the most commonly-asked questions about employee interviews is, “What questions can I legally ask?”

If you have taken the time to write a thoughtful position description, that document will provide significant guidance to you in planning your interview questions. For example, if one of the requirements of the position is work with feeding calves, ask them about experience they have had working with young animals – even if these were not farm animals. Ask if they have any thoughts about what signals might help them notice that a calf may be getting sick? If they have no idea, ask them how they might learn about that. If the person has past experience in agriculture, you can ask many questions about those past experiences, equipment they have worked with and the entire range of job duties in the farm operation.

If there are physical requirements of the position, such as lifting heavy items or standing for long periods of time, you can ask questions related to those tasks. For example, you can say, “This job may require you to lift 50-pound sacks of feed or 80-pound bales of alfalfa. Are you able to perform those tasks?” But don’t just look at a person who may appear small in stature and mentally disqualify them for the position. And remember, the person may have other more important traits such as attention to sanitation details or recognizing an animal that is off-feed. It is easier to accommodate lifting tasks than to try to teach other skills that may be more important in the overall qualifications to work with your valuable equipment or livestock.

Essentially, go over the position description with the candidate. Ask the individual to describe past education or experience that will help them to perform the listed tasks on your dairy farm.

Describe working conditions, days and hours to be worked and flexibility required. Then ask specifically if the person is able to work those hours, and if they are able to come in to work with short notice. Do not ask questions like, “Do you have children – and if so, what are your child care arrangements?” Rather, just ask, “If a person who is scheduled to work doesn’t show up or calls in sick, we may need to call other employees to come in and cover that shift. Would you be able to do that on short notice?”

Don’t ask employment candidates if they own a car. Simply ask the person if they have a reliable method to get to work. If duties of the position will require the employee to drive one of your farm vehicles, you will need to determine whether the individual has a valid driver’s license – either a regular license or a CDL, as may be required. You can certainly ask about this, and verify at the time of an employment offer and acceptance.

Do not ask questions about an individual’s age, race, religion, politics, family or marital status. These inquiries simply have nothing to do with the job requirements that should be found in the written position description. And there are so many other, better questions that will actually help you get to know a person, their likes, dislikes and personality. A few suggestions:

- What do you like to do in your spare time?
- Do you have any hobbies, interests?
- What movies, books or music do you enjoy?
- Are you a sports fan? What kind of sports do you enjoy watching or participating in?

These kinds of questions help you to get to know a potential employee.

Finally, give the candidate time to ask questions of you. Employers can learn a great deal about a person from the types of questions they ask – and hopefully they have some questions for you. At the end of the interview, tell the candidate what your decision process is going to be. If you intend to narrow the field and bring back one or two
employees for a second interview, let them know that. If you need to know how soon they could start employment, be sure to ask that question.

We will continue to look at employee hiring and management in future articles. In the meantime, feel free to contact me with any of your employee management questions.

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Updates, continued from page 1

**Suggested Closing Inventory Prices for 2011 Records** --- C1-40 (2 pages)

**Financial Performance Measures for Iowa Farms** --- C3-55 (8 pages)

Please add these files to your handbook and remove the out-of-date material.

**Internet Updates**

The following information files and tools have been added or updated on [www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm).

**Average Crop Revenue Election (ACRE)** --- A1-45 (2 pages)

**Current Profitability**

The following tools have been updated on [www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm/info/outlook.html](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm/info/outlook.html).

- **Corn Profitability** --- A1-85
- **Soybean Profitability** --- A1-86
- **Season Average Price Calculator** --- A2-15
- **Ethanol Profitability** --- D1-10
- **Biodiesel Profitability** --- D1-15
- **Returns for Farrow-to-Finish** --- B1-30
- **Returns for Weaned Pigs** --- B1-33
- **Returns for Steer Calves** --- B1-35
- **Returns for Yearling Steers** --- B1-35