



Employee Recruitment: *Intentional and Continuous*

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Editor's Note: This is the second in a series of articles providing an in-depth look at practices employers can adopt to improve employee management, and in turn, their operation's bottom line. It expounds on information Durst's colleague Stan Moore presented at the Nebraska Beef Industry Scholars Beef Summit last November.

Ever hear a farmer or rancher complain about his or her employees? Ever want to say to them, "Well, who hired them?" We all understand the value of having good employees, but our actions often don't reflect that. In the work that Stan Moore and I have been doing, we have come to believe that hiring well is the first step to having good employees. That shouldn't come as a surprise, so why is it that many don't do better?

Frankly, we think the reason is that farmers and ranchers get behind the ball instead of being in front of it. What does that mean? Let's say that a ranch hand quits and walks off the job just as you need people to work the herd. After a day or two of working short-handed, "Sam" pulls in driving a beat-up truck followed by a cloud of dust. Your first reaction may be, "If he is willing, we'll take him," but that is a decision made behind the ball. You feel like you have to do it, good or bad.

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We'd like to suggest that the better way is to be intentional about finding people to work for you (that's recruitment), and to select the best (that is the process of hiring). Depending on the number of employees you have at any one time, you might want to think about this as a continuous function to which you need to pay attention.

Recruitment

Let's start with recruitment. Here are four ways to recruit successfully.

1. Screen unsolicited applicants.

When "Sam" or "Jenny" pulls in, whether or not you have an opening at that time, it is a good opportunity to learn a little about him or her and make a basic determination about whether you want to consider that individual further when there is an opening or when you want to grow the workforce. You can do that by having a set of standard screening questions that you can ask when someone

saunters up to you in old boots and new hat and asks if you are hiring. Try these questions or make up some of your own.

- How does it happen that you are available to work?

I try not to make too many assumptions, but I want to know whether someone is unemployed because he just quit or was fired from another job (you can't ask that, but you can give him plenty of opportunity to tell you more than you asked), or maybe he was just discharged from the Marine Corps. Maybe she has a job and took some of her day off to look for a better job. The reason that a person has opportunity to stop in may help to make that first decision about whether to consider an individual any further.

- Why would you like to work here?

I sure don't want to hear that "It beats starving." I would rather hear an answer that indicates a willingness to commit and work a long time here. Maybe he answers that he would like

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to be a part of the team we have going and feels he could contribute. Ask the open-ended question and see what you can learn.

- What is the main reason I should consider you?

This is an opportunity for the dropout to tell you what she considers to be her strength. You then can think about if you want that strength and how it would fit in with your team.

- Is that what I would hear from your last employer?

In some ways, that is calling a would-be employee's bluff (if it is that). You want to know if that claimed strength would be recognized by her former employer. It is also good to find out what she thinks of her last employer. A question like this will usually bring it out. I figure that someone who runs down her last employer is going to run down the next one sooner or later.

Based on their responses, make a decision on whether to provide an application form (yes, this is important). If you have an opening, you can suggest a day and time to come back with the completed application for an extended interview. If you don't have a position

available at the time, you can suggest that you would like to keep the completed application on file and contact the applicant for an interview when one opens up. Don't give an application to someone you wouldn't consider hiring.

2. Keep your eyes open for good employees.

Good employees at one business are more likely to be good employees at another business. I like to encourage farmers and ranchers to keep their eyes open for good employees they see (not from another farm – that will get you a bad reputation!), perhaps in a fast-food restaurant, at the auto parts store or somewhere else. Hand that person your business card and ask him to give you a call if he would ever consider working on a ranch or your type of business.

With this action, you are being proactive in looking for potential employees, and by virtue of impressing you, an individual moves to the step of getting an application. If you don't have business cards, get some

printed and carry them with you. As you design your business card, consider including on it something about the values on which your business is based. That will help to attract people who share your values.

3. Offer your employees an incentive to refer people.

Good employees usually want you to hire people who will be good teammates and workers. When a current employee refers someone, it means he recognizes that that person will reflect back on him. That should result in him referring only people who he believes will do a good job. Consider a policy that gives a referring employee an incentive payment when he refers an applicant who is hired and works on the job at least 30 days.

4. Develop an ad that reflects the type of person you are looking for.

How is this for a want ad: "Wanted – someone to feed cattle; apply..."? Well, what kind of applicant will that attract? If you want something other than the bottom of the barrel, then your ad should reflect that. Describe advantages of the job that reflect your values. For example: "Wanted – someone to join a cohesive team in caring for cattle to produce the best beef possible. Responsible, committed and gentle individuals can apply by..." Make your ad an advertisement for what you believe is best about your business.

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The process of hiring

Each of the methods above is an intentional way to get good applicants, but you still need to hire the best people, and that takes a process beyond the application. We believe that the best process is to conduct an organized interview and to check references before making an offer.

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The interview is an opportunity to have a two-way discussion about the job and the suitability of the applicant for it. Take some time to describe what the position entails and ask open-ended questions (that is, questions that can't be answered either "yes" or "no") to learn more about the applicant.

- You could ask questions such as:
- Tell me about your experience working with animals.
 - Describe a job that you really enjoyed and what made it so good.
 - Talk with me about how technology has enabled you to do more.
 - What kinds of things frustrate you?

- How do you think you can contribute to the success of this business?

You can only ask questions that directly affect an applicant's ability to do the job. You cannot ask, for example, if she has children she needs to care for, but you can ask about her availability to work the hours you specify – and sometimes longer hours.

Many farmers and ranchers hire people based more on the character aspects of the applicant and an individual's perceived ability to learn the skills necessary for the job, rather than on hiring someone with experience. That may yield a better teammate for the work crew you have, but it will take someone's time to train the new employee on the skills needed to be successful. Skills and knowledge can be learned, but character is embedded. It may, therefore, be short-sighted to let the fear of the necessity of training drive your hiring decision.

When checking references, if nothing else, ask former employers, "Would you hire this person again? Why or why not?"

Your hiring process reflects your seriousness about having good employees. We heard from an employee that he wished his employer would "be more serious about who you hire!"

Hiring well is the first step to having great employees. What you do with them after they are hired will be discussed in future articles. Start by hiring people who are most likely to succeed and you will make the next steps easier and reduce the number of times that you have to go through the hiring process. ■NC■

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