

Finding Good Help



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Finding and keeping good help doesn't have to be impossible.

by Kasey Brown, associate editor

"It's hard to find good help these days," is a pretty common saying. Agriculture is not an easy profession, and there is always work to be done. In many cases within small-scale operations, the owner is the manager and the primary labor force. How do you decide when enough is enough, it's time to hire an employee?

The answer: "When you decide you want a higher quality of life. Say, you've done everything by yourself for so many years and decide that you need to train someone because you can't do it all for the next 10-15 years," says Charles Contreras, senior business solutions manager for Zoetis' PeopleFirst™. The PeopleFirst division came about because many Zoetis clients were asking for help finding, training and retaining good, quality people.

There are quite a few considerations to

keep in mind when growing a business. Contreras says business growth can be a chicken vs. egg situation. Do you grow your infrastructure first or grow your employee base? You don't want to burn out your employees, and you also need the equipment for all of your employees to be able to do their job. He asserts that people contribute to growth just as much as infrastructure does.

While he works with operations and companies of all sizes, he says when many family-run businesses grow to bring in family members or outside employees, they need to learn how to become managers.

"I think, in general, the agriculture industry is based on hard work. A lot of

times, the most successful people have been the hardest workers. As they continue to grow because of their success, now they are relying more on having people do certain parts of the work for them because they can't do all of the work themselves. What we see is, in order to take the business to the next level of success, they have to develop into a supervisor or a manager-type position that handles some of those things for them," Contreras explains.

When your business is ready to grow, make sure you are ready to grow with it, he notes. This could mean getting into a different mind-set as a manager or making sure a new manager is really the right person for the job.

"A lot of times, we promote the person who stands out the most doing the hard work, but the skillset they have sometimes



works against them. [As a worker,] they tend to not spend a lot of time talking, they have very high standards, and if they didn't know how to do something, they just figure it out. Then you put that person in charge of managing people and sometimes those skillsets will work against you."

Contreras says that managers can fail "if they don't spend a lot of time communicating with employees on what needs to be done and the goals of the company. They expect employees to figure out how to do things and get frustrated when they don't. A lot of times, that person tends to try to do all the work themselves, and either get burnt out or you find that they fire people a lot."

Growing a business and getting a manager in the right mind-set are good first steps, but where do you look for good employees?

Creating, preparing the right team

Contreras suggests using word of mouth from excellent employees or people who know your operation as the first place to look. These employees already thrive in your operation's culture and understand the type and load of work. It always depends on the individual operation, but he also recommended using the community network through local schools or churches.

When it comes to hiring help, King Ranch® Institute for Ranch Management Director and Robert J. and Helen C. Klebe Endowed Chair Clay Mathis recommends looking for people who exhibit problem-solving skills, quick learning, organization and neatness. These characteristics are predictors of intelligence and conscientiousness, which enhance performance.

Once you hire your employees, how do you get them started? Training is incredibly important. Dan Buskirk, associate professor and faculty coordinator for the Michigan State University (MSU) Beef Cattle Teaching & Research Center and the MSU Beef Cow-Calf Teaching & Research Center, says all of his staff and student workers must complete training modules before even stepping foot on the farm.

These training modules include a variety of topics like animal handling, operating guidelines, tractor safety, thermal stress and environmental management systems. Each module has its own guideline on how often the training must occur. Some can be taken only once, some every year or three or more years, and others must be retaken every time a version changes.

In addition to the online modules, Buskirk says the majority of the training for student workers happens in small groups of two to

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Table 1: Comparative ranking (t indicates a tie) of job satisfaction factors by cowboys and general managers

Factor	Cowboy	GM
Having the tools and information necessary for the job	1	3t
Clearly understanding performance expectations	2	1t
Challenging and interesting work	3	6
Knowing and understanding the mission statement	4t	11
Feeling managers welcome their opinions and suggestions	4t	3t
Meaningful, timely and constructive feedback	6	7
Feeling that criteria to evaluate represents job performance	7	8
Recognition from a manager(s) for good work	8t	1t
Understanding why management decisions are made	8t	9t
Opportunities for job-related training and personal development	10	10
Feeling that a manager takes personal interest in them	11	3t
New employee training	12	9t
On-ranch recreational opportunities for family	13	13
On-ranch work opportunities for family	14	14

Source: King Ranch® Institute for Ranch Management.



► While many students have experience showing cattle, Buskirk admits that many don't understand how a commercial-sized farm operates. On-site experience is key for these employees.

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Table 2: Comparative ranking (t indicates a tie) of employee management factors by cowboys and general managers

Factor	Cowboy	GM
Bonuses based on personal achievement	1	4
Salary increase	2	1
Increased responsibility and decision-making power	3	3
Increase job security	4	5t
Opportunities for advancement	5	2
Bonuses based on ranch achievement	6	5t
Private recognition from the manager	7	5t
Increased vacation time	8	9
Other	9	10
Public recognition from the manager	10	8

Source: King Ranch® Institute for Ranch Management.

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three people with the manager and assistant manager. This allows for more individual attention, but trains many people efficiently. The students are monitored closely and get more freedom and responsibility as the semester progresses. This gives them plenty of on-the-job experience before doing things on their own.

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While these training modules are university resources, there are other ways to train employees. Contreras suggests formalizing your onboarding process, or the procedure in which you prepare new employees for the job. Consider whether you can have new employees come in when you can dedicate enough time to explain their duties, or designate a person they can follow to learn their responsibilities.

Contreras explains that PeopleFirst has developed a learning management portal online that has interactive modules that last about 20 minutes. He says there are modules that illustrate processes in feedlots or cow-calf operations, which can allow new employees to become familiar with certain aspects before they set foot on the farm or ranch. These modules also explain an employee's role in the beef industry's big picture. More information on these modules can be found at www.growpeoplefirst.com.

Culture and retention

You've found your employees, now how do you keep them engaged?

"It's expensive when people leave and you have to hire new employees," said Mathis, noting that the cost of turnover has been



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PHOTO BY KATLYN TUNSTILL, NIAA/ANGUS JOURNAL PHOTO CONTEST

estimated to be 50%-150% of the annual salary of that individual.

To avoid this, having a work culture that keeps employees engaged is necessary. Buskirk suggests having a fair amount of flexibility and opportunities for employees' specific interests. For employees "in the trenches," he also recommends giving them the opportunity to get off the farm every once in a while.

"We try to give them the opportunity to do some different things, like attend a bull sale. It shows that we are investing in them while they are investing in us," Buskirk explains.

Communication is another aspect of a successful work culture. Every Friday morning, he says, everyone meets for an hour to get everyone on the same page. Each

person has the opportunity to ask questions and learn about industry information, and managers can assess how employees are doing.

Contreras says employees need to know that they can improve their lot in life with your business. Are there income advancement opportunities? Is there any career or personal development?

"A lot of employee turnover is because the employee doesn't see a place to advance," he notes.

The advancements "ladder" doesn't have to be straight up; there can be chances for diagonal or lateral advancement. For instance, he explains that some operations have employees master different departments or areas of the business before becoming a manager. While the employee doesn't move straight up, the position is not stagnant, either.

Mathis shared a King Ranch Institute research project that surveyed employees and managers from 15 ranches in nine states. The survey showed some discrepancies in preferences of job satisfaction and motivating factors between managers and employees (see Tables 1 and 2). Communication between employees and managers can alleviate some of those discrepancies and ensure that the optimal management and motivation factors are used.

Growing a business is daunting, but finding and keeping good employees can make the transition easier if everyone is prepared.

Keeping employees engaged

King Ranch® Institute for Ranch Management Director and Robert J. and Helen C. Klebe Endowed Chair Clay Mathis shared information from a 2006 study of characteristics of engaged and satisfied employees.

1. I know what is expected of me at work.
2. I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right now.
3. At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
4. In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.
5. My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.
6. There is someone at work who encourages my development.
7. At work, my opinions seem to count.
8. The mission or purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important.
9. My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work.
10. I have a best friend at work.
11. In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.
12. This last year I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow.

