

Three workforce investments that can have a big payoff

Investments in human resource management impact every facet of the farm business and can pay big dividends. Investing in every aspect of the farm business happens over time. Likewise, investing in employees is not just done once, it is continuous. Investing in your people means not only making monetary investments, but making investments in management time and energy, too. Three important investments to make in your workforce are:

Focus on hiring, training and feedback for workforce success.

1) Hiring employees who have a high probability of success - Some years ago Extension researchers conducted a study where they gave a group of job applicants in California a work test, in this case grape pruning. They timed and measured the productivity of each applicant and found that the most productive applicants for the job performed three to five times more work than the least productive applicants.

So it truly matters who you hire, and that you have in place a recruitment and selection process to help identify and hire top performers, or individuals who can become top performers.

It starts with generating a pool of applicants. Whether it's word of mouth, e-mail, Craigslist or any of a variety of other recruitment methods, your recruiting efforts should result in a sufficient pool of applicants for the job. Within that pool should be some well-qualified candidates. If there are no satisfactory candidates, the recruiting process should be continued, and possibly expanded.

The next step is to screen, interview and select the individual most likely to be productive and successful. The interview should be conducted with a written set of questions and each applicant should be asked same questions. This helps to quantify each individual's answers for comparison at the end of the interview process. The entire process should be conducted by a supervisor or someone on the management team who is properly trained in the hiring process and who can allocate the time required to recruit and interview properly.

Selection of an individual to be hired should be done carefully, taking into account all available and relevant information related to the individual's potential to perform. This includes carefully checking references and finding out as much as possible about the applicant's past job performance.

On a busy farm operation, one of the biggest challenges farm managers have is spending the time necessary to conduct the

recruitment and selection process effectively. Adequate time invested is very likely to dramatically increase the probability that the new hire will be successful.

2) Orientation, training and retraining - Once you have selected the individual who you feel has the potential to grow with your business, the next step is to support their growth and development.

It starts with an effective step-by-step orientation process, which helps the new person quickly become familiar with their new employer and what will be expected in the new position. After orientation, managers should put in place a process for training and development for each employee. Supervisors should be trained to help create a development plan for each employee based on identified training needs and with the active involvement of the employee. Farm businesses that develop individualized training and development plans are more likely to have a staff who is quality conscious and productive.

3) Interpersonal communication and feedback - Over my career I have read numerous surveys of dairy employees related to likes and dislikes about their job and what they expect from their employers. Interestingly, employees don't value money most. In survey after survey dairy employees cite communication issues, and especially performance feedback from supervisors, as a top priority to help ensure their productivity and job satisfaction. Employees want feedback from their managers, not once in a while, but on a continuing basis. They want to know where they stand, what is required of them, how to improve, and most importantly, that their efforts are appreciated.

It is important to note that these three workforce investments are less related to the direct expenditure of dollars and more related to management's investment in the growth and competence of employees. Of course wages should be competitive with those of other employers, and benefits should be, as well. In the end, however, the most important measures of success may be the supervisor's investment in the success of each employee. □

Thomas Maloney (trm5@cornell.edu) is a Senior Extension Associate in The Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management at Cornell University.