

Building Your Reputation as an Employer

Bernard L. Erven

**Department of Agricultural, Environmental and Development Economics
Ohio State University**

Introduction

In tight labor markets, farm employers must compete aggressively with other employers for quality employees. These quality employees are essential to the accomplishment of production, financial and growth goals. The lack of quality employees can jeopardize the very future of the business.

Your challenge is to provide jobs that are attractive to people who have employment alternatives in the nonfarm labor market, i.e., do better than simply drawing from the ranks of the unemployed. Your depending primarily on people looking for something temporary until a better job comes along guarantees a never-ending shortage of labor. The need is apparent to build a reputation of being an excellent place to work. Actually building that reputation is a long-term challenge that you must face with creativity, imagination and confidence.

This paper outlines a variety of suggestions designed to help make farms highly desirable places of employment. Job design, team building and employer reputation are the key ingredients. Managers are the builders. Their focus should be employees. Why should employees be pleased to work for a farmer if the farmer is not proud of what he or she has to offer?

Design Jobs with Employees in Mind

You can design jobs with employees in mind. Uninteresting or boring jobs will cause problems. Employers can capitalize on employees' interests and the advantages they see in farm work. People who love animals are motivated by the opportunity to work with animals. Jobs emphasizing animals attract such people. Some people like machinery much more than animals. Some enjoy repairing machinery more than operating it. Some people like office work; others want to be outdoors.

Managers have the primary responsibility for designing jobs. They first need to take into consideration the tasks that must be accomplished for the farm to succeed. They can also take into consideration what individuals want in their jobs. Sometimes minor changes in job design can dramatically improve a job in the employee's view, e.g., changing a calf feeder's job to include, or no longer include, explanation of calf care to farm visitors. Another example is asking the employee to work closely with the veterinarian to improve calf health.

Job design cannot overcome the fact that no job is perfect. Farm jobs have some disadvantages managers need to address when designing jobs. Each of the following job

characteristics responds to often stated disadvantages of farm work: reasonable number of work hours per day and per week; proper equipment in good repair; well lighted and ventilated work areas; training; some flexibility in scheduling work hours; and regular communication with the supervisor.

Anticipating what will help motivate employees is important in job design. First, design jobs whenever possible to encourage employees to use a variety of skills. Think about why assembly line jobs are boring. Standing in one place using only one or two skills doing the same thing repeatedly is not satisfying for most people. One reason that many workers like varied work is that they get to use a variety of skills.

Second, design jobs whenever possible so that an employee does a total job, e.g., all aspects of calf raising as contrasted with just feeding or a milker position that includes more responsibilities than just milking. Even such a simple task as repairing gates may be more satisfying if one person has the responsibility to do everything including determining what parts are needed, buying parts, taking the gate apart, replacing parts, reassembling and testing to be sure everything is in order.

Third, design jobs so that the employee understands the significance of his or her job to the farm. Why is milking important? Why is calf raising important? What contribution is the person making by doing a good job with dry cows? What problems are caused later on if calves are not given proper care? The person should have answers to these kinds of basic questions.

Fourth, design jobs so that each employee has responsibility, challenge, freedom and the opportunity to be creative. This requires the supervisor or owner/operator of the farm to delegate some authority. Delegation can be a powerful tool for improving a job. You can do the job however you want as long as you get results. Such words, such delegation, such responsibility can have positive impacts on employees.

Finally, make feedback a part of job design. Well-designed jobs anticipate the need for communication. Most employees want to know what is expected of them in the job, how they are doing, how they can improve, what latitude they have in changing how they do their tasks, what should be discussed with a supervisor and when the discussion should occur. Employees rarely complain about too much communication with their supervisor. They often want more communication.

Build a Farm Team

Saying that we are a team is easy. Actually functioning as a team is difficult. Making employees feel important to the team and business takes time. It often starts with how the employer views employees. Are employees working managers or managed workers? Employees as working managers suggests that each person in the business has ideas on how to improve the business. Even those people incapable of understanding much about the business beyond their own jobs may have ideas about how to do their jobs better. Useful

suggestions often stay hidden inside employees' heads when they do not feel they are an important part of the farm's team.

Emphasize team building. Teams are built through four stages: forming, storming, norming and performing. In the forming stage, farm team members break the ice with each other, become oriented to farm goals and begin to exchange ideas. The forming stage is particularly important when integrating new employees with established employees, and family members with nonfamily members. Storming is the stage of conflict, open disagreement and the surfacing of conflicting ideas. Managers face the challenge of getting disagreements out in the open for discussion and resolution. Hidden disagreements constrain trust and growth of the team. Norming follows from resolving conflicts. Team harmony and unity arise. By this stage, the leader is clearly identified and team members' roles are clear. By the performing stage, the team is functioning well. The team solves the farm's problems for the good of the farm business. The team is involved in decision-making.

Turnover among team members forces the team to retreat to a previous stage of development followed by rebuilding. Sometimes the retreat is all the way back to the forming stage. Clearly, a continuous rebuilding of the team negatively affects longer-term employees. Thus, employee satisfaction and employee turnover are closely related. Too often, the impact of turnover on co-workers is ignored. Employees do care what happens to their valued co-workers.

Employers can improve commitment to team building by rewarding employees for their contributions to team efforts. Rewarding only individual efforts sends a strong signal to employees that the business is a collection of individuals rather than a team. Competing with co-workers replaces cooperation. An employer should not say, "We are a team" and then encourage employees to look out first for their own interests. Start by asking how the milking team is doing or how the crops team is doing. Then ask how individuals within these teams are doing.

Meshing family and nonfamily team members challenges many farm managers. Building an effective team in a family business setting requires careful attention to the goals, interests and fears of people inside and outside the owners' families. The forming, storming, norming and performing steps of team building must engage family members. Those members wanting special considerations just because they are family seriously hamper team building. Nonfamily members unwilling to accept the reality of family members' closeness and commitment to each other, for example, also hamper team building.

Build a Reputation as an Outstanding Employer

One's reputation is highly personal. The good news is that each employer owns his or her reputation in the community. Being known as a good place to work immediately gives new employees pride in having been hired. The new employees speak with enthusiasm with friends about their place of employment. They start with a more positive frame of mind about their job, coworkers, supervisor and responsibilities. How can an individual farmer build a positive reputation? The closely related question is how can an individual farmer build a

positive reputation if farms in general in the community have the reputation as a poor place to work?

Following is a list of guidelines from which to pick and chose strategies, policies and practices for building a positive reputation. Some guidelines for building a reputation as an employer overlap with job design and team building already discussed. The interrelationships are apparent.

Like, Enjoy and Appreciate Employees

An employer and employee have an interpersonal relationship. The attitude toward employees the employer brings to the relationship can have a great impact. Employees easily sense the extent to which their employer likes, enjoys and appreciates them. An employer with a poor attitude toward employees needs to examine the attitude's impact on his or her reputation as a place to work. Negative attitudes can be changed over time. Both the employer and employees will benefit.

A few bad experiences with just one or two employees can sour one's attitude. Step back and put the bad experiences in the context of all employees over the last few months and years. Think about the two or three employees you value most and the contributions they are making to the business. Work hard to prevent a single employee or a few employee incidents from poisoning your attitude.

Use Written Job Descriptions

Employees like to know what they have been hired to do. As responsibilities change, they like to have an explicit understanding with their supervisor. Employees also appreciate knowing what managers do and what their coworkers do. Job descriptions provide an excellent foundation for performance evaluations and discussion of training needs.

Provide Training

Provide training for employees so that they can do well what they have been hired to do. Few people enjoy doing what they cannot do well. Mediocre performance because of lack of training and a supervisor's criticism for the mediocre performance frustrate even the most enthusiastic employee. Training is an investment in people. An employer's willingness to make this investment in employees helps build a positive image among employees, customers and others in the community.

Show Trust

Show trust in employees by delegating authority and responsibility to them. The delegation helps satisfy employees' esteem needs. It also improves their sense of being part of a team. A bonus from showing trust is the gain in time the manager has for working on his or her most important tasks.

Catch People Doing Things Right

Catch people doing things right and say thank you. Performance appraisals that emphasize the positive help build the reputation of the employer. Focusing on the negative by catching people doing things wrong and then correcting them causes employees to fear or at least dread performance appraisals. Emphasizing the negative creates an air of assumed guilt rather than the desired air of competence and confidence.

Develop Pride

Building widespread pride in the organization is a long-term effort. Recognition of the organization's successes by visitors and feature stories in the local media can help. Employee recognition outside the organization and public show of appreciation also helps. Attractive hats with the farm name and jackets with employee names worn proudly in the community send a message that employees are glad to be part of the farm team.

Celebrate Successes

Celebrate the farm's successes. Teams are expected to work together to accomplish the farm's goals. They should also celebrate together when the goals are accomplished. Celebrations express the employer's appreciation.

Communicate Clearly and Often

Communicate clearly and often with employees. Staff meetings, a daily break period including supervisors and employees, a message board, two-way radios, clear instructions, opportunities to ask questions, regular performance appraisals and planning together for the coming year are just a few examples of how employers can facilitate communication. An employee complaint of too much communication is rare. A complaint of not enough communication is common.

Compensate Fairly

Fairness of compensation matters more than level of compensation in building a positive reputation as an employer. The fairness of compensation depends on both external equity and internal equity. Farm employers and their employees measure external equity by comparing on farm pay with what employees could be earning elsewhere in the community given their abilities and experience. The comparisons should include other farm jobs plus jobs outside agriculture. Internal equity measures how one employee's compensation compares to that of others within the farm who are doing work with similar value to the organization. Paying only on the basis of how long a person has worked on the farm can cause the most valuable employees to earn less than a long-term average worker.

Provide Exceptional Monetary Benefits

Total compensation includes both cash wages and monetary benefits such as health insurance, paid vacation, paid sick leave, retirement programs, housing and utilities, uniforms, overtime pay and pay differentials, e.g., holidays, third shift and weekends. A farm's reputation as a place to work can be considerably enhanced by offering benefits current and potential employees consider exceptional. A cafeteria of benefits allows employees to make choices based on their needs and preferences. Offering choice need not increase the employer's cost for benefits.

Provide Extraordinary Informal Benefits

Farm employers can also boost their reputations as employers by offering creative informal benefits and rewards. Informal rewards have either no out-of-pocket dollar cost or are low cost in terms of the employee's total compensation. Some examples are: birthday cards sent to employees' children; employer attending all weddings, baptisms and birthday parties to which invited by an employee; taking a course in the language spoken by your non-English speaking employees; hiring a photographer to take pictures of employees' families; personally greeting each employee each day; seeking out an employee just to say thank you; offering an employee of the year award with the recipient chosen by other employees; asking employees to explain to farm visitors what they do and why it is important; and giving an especially deserving employee tickets to a sold out major sporting event or concert. Only the employer's creativity limits the potential.

A wonderful book titled 1001 Ways to Reward Employees by Bob Nelson (ISBN 1-56305-399-X, 1994) can help stimulate an employer's creativity. Some examples from the book: volunteer to do another person's least desirable work for a day (page 4), when paychecks go out, write a note on the envelope recognizing an employee's accomplishments (page 12), offer a deserving employee a change in job title (page 28), when you hear a positive remark about an individual, repeat it to that person as soon as possible (page 31), give employees personalized belt buckles (page 70), use the money that goes into the vending machines in the employees' lunchroom to subsidize trips and outings (page 182), give an employee more autonomy (page 198) and present unexpected awards at award or employee appreciation dinners (page 207). If you find only 1 per cent of the book's 1001 suggestions to be useful, you will soon be recommending the book to other managers. One caution – pay careful attention to what employees appreciate.

Promote from Within

Promoting from within recognizes an employee's past contribution and shows the employers confidence in the employee. It also sends a signal to other employees that they have career advancement opportunities without changing employers.

Make the Business Family-friendly

Both parents employed, single parents employed, child rearing responsibilities, finding reliable childcare and emergencies caused by illness are examples of family factors causing

farm employee frustrations. These same factors can cause tardiness and absenteeism. The farm's best employee does not necessarily escape family influences on performance and reliability.

Making the business family-friendly means anticipating these family-caused frustrations and pressures. More important, it means helping employees deal with their family responsibilities. Some ideas to consider: providing child care on the farm, offering emergency child care, providing a list of child care providers in the community, allowing flexible hours, job sharing, health insurance with family coverage, gifts for a newborn, preschool scholarships and scholarships for high school graduates who have been employed on the farm. Family-friendly measures increase the cost of labor. They also help attract and keep qualified employees.

Be Proud of Advancing Employees

Be proud when outstanding employees advance their careers by changing employers. Losing an outstanding employee is often disappointing. Turning the loss to an advantage is a challenge. Work to have the employee leave with a positive attitude and a commitment to say good things about the place of employment where he or she got a start and an opportunity to learn. Causing departing employees to feel guilty or disloyal detracts from an employer's reputation as a place to work.

Summary

Each farm needs quality workers who develop a commitment to the success of the farm. Farm success goes hand in hand with employee success. Employee turnover, lack of qualified applicants, people seemingly satisfied to just get by, labor shortages and employees more me-caring than we-caring are chronic frustrations for many farm managers. Making farms an appealing place to work helps overcome these frustrations.

The three interrelated guidelines discussed in this paper can help: 1) design your jobs with employees in mind, 2) build a farm team and make employees an important part of that team and 3) build a reputation as an outstanding employer. Immense benefits await employers able to use these guidelines.