



A warm body is not good enough

The hiring process takes time; create a culture where employees give you advance notice before they leave so that you can find the right replacement.

by Phil Durst

IN ANY discussion I have with farm owners about employees and filling a job position, I almost always hear, “Many times, I’d just be glad for a warm body.” Farm owners and managers often feel that they simply need to get somebody — maybe even anybody — hired when they have gone days or weeks working extra shifts because of a vacancy on the team.

On a dairy that is milking cows most of the 24-hour day, missing a single individual on a milking shift is a hardship on the entire shift, and often on the shift leader, manager, or owner as well. When someone comes looking for a job, they hungrily hire them, no matter what!



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There is an old saying about not going grocery shopping when you are hungry. Hiring a new employee when you have been short an employee for days is a lot like that. The tendency is to be less selective and not worry about whether someone will stay.

Thus, the problem gets compounded. When farmers hire arbitrarily, they may cut short the interview and reference checks. They might push people into a position with little to no onboarding or training. Those shortcuts raise the risk of a poor hire and loss of the new employee, leaving the farm looking for a

another employee in a slim market. And so, the cycle continues.

Employee turnover will always be with us, but we should work to reduce the turnover rate. That means hiring selectively and retaining good employees. But even so, employers will always have to deal with at least some turnover.

Is there any way out of this cycle?

Recently, a farm manager named Hubaldo shared with me a way that he has broken the cycle. He said, “Creating a good relationship with our employees is crucial. Getting them to care for us is the only way they will do a good job and let us know when they are planning to leave, or maybe even give us a chance to correct whatever situation is pushing them to make that decision. I don’t consider our farm to be the highest paid job around. I think we are competitive, but I know we go out of our way to help employees and show them we appreciate them.”

Good will works both ways

The relationships he builds with employees, the respect that he shows them, and the investment he makes in them has, among other results, meant that employees are more likely to give him two weeks notice before leaving. These two weeks create margin, and that is what is needed on many farms.

Two weeks notice is given by employees who are determined to leave but are willing to show their current employer the respect of letting them know ahead of time. While it does not guarantee that you will be able to find a great replacement, two weeks advance notice provides opportunity to find someone before the other has left.

TWO WEEKS NOTICE given by a departing employee can mean the difference between hiring just anybody versus someone who is actually right for the job.

Another manager, Roy, put it this way, “We used to be behind the curve on hiring people, and that left us with taking any warm body. Now we work to stay ahead of the curve.”

Set your expectations

How can you get more of your employees to provide a two weeks notice before leaving? Emphasize it from the start of their employment. During the interview, stress the fact that good team function depends on everyone working together. When someone is not there, the team can’t function as well and there are greater demands on other individuals. Put it in the context of respecting their teammates and respecting the business.

At the same time, when a manager hires someone who is working at another job, he or she should expect that the employee will provide two weeks notice to their current employer. He or she does not try to undercut the current employer, but instead, reinforces the importance of that notice. He or she may try to work the new hire in on a shift or two but is willing to wait.

Margin can also be created by having part-time employees on your payroll who can work additional hours, maybe even full time, if needed. When an opening occurs, look first to your part-time employees as potential full-time teammates.

Let employees know that you will tell future employers who contact you whether or not advanced notice of departure was provided and for what period. If an employee tells you he or she is quitting, ask them to work the next two weeks, if you feel he or she will still be a productive employee.

The benefits of two weeks

When an employee provides notice of leaving, make the most of the opportunity. Ask current workers for referrals, and take time to interview applicants and talk with them about your business and the values by which you operate. If you need to advertise, get started on it right away. Be prepared in advance by having your ad ready. Know where it needs to be sent and plan for how long you will advertise.

If an employee is providing advance notice of leaving, it would be good to sit down with him or her and conduct an exit interview. Find out what the person liked and didn’t like about working on your farm. Have your questions prepared ahead of time. Do this whether or not you liked the employee. Employees can reveal things that need to be changed in order to reduce the risk of another one leaving.

How selective are you in hiring? Are you trying to find a good person to fill a specific need, or are you taking anybody because you have to fill a hole that opened up quickly? From start to finish with an employee, create the expectation that employees will provide advance notice before leaving, enabling you to hire more selectively.

Margin relieves employers of feeling that they are “over the barrel” when it comes to filling an open position. By working to improve the margin you have when an employee leaves, you can be more selective. That, in turn, may help you to reduce your employee turnover rate. 🐄