



Two weeks difference between hiring a warm body or selective hiring

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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.

In any discussion with farm owners about managing employees I almost always hear, “Many times, I’d just be glad for a warm body.” about filling a job position. 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.

In a dairy business 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 most often on the shift leader, manager or owner. Then, when someone comes looking for a job, they hungrily hire them, no matter what!

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, it may be that they cut short the interview and reference checks. They may push people into a position with little to no onboarding and/or training. Those shortcuts increase the risk of a poor hire and of loss of the new employee, putting the farm back in an increasingly slim market for employees. So, the cycle continues.

Employee turnover will always be with us. We should be working to reduce the turnover rate. That means hiring selectively and retaining good employees. But, even the turnover we have can be different.

Is there any way out of this cycle? Recently, Husbaldo, a farm manager 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 situations is pushing them to make that decision. I don’t consider our farm being the highest paid jobs around, I think we are competitive, but I know we go out of our way to help employees and show them we appreciate them.”

The relationships he builds with employees, the respect that he shows them and the investment he makes in them, has among its results, that employees are more likely to give him two weeks notice before leaving. Two weeks creates margin, and that is what is needed on many farms. Two weeks notice is given by employees who determine 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.

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, but now we work to stay ahead of the curve.” How can you get more of your employees to provide a two weeks notice before leaving? Emphasize it from the start. During the interview, stress the fact that good team function depends on everyone working together and that when one is not there, the team can’t function as well or that there are increased demands on other individuals. Put it in context of respecting their teammates and respecting the business.

This same farm manager says that when he hires someone who is working at another job he expects that employee will provide two weeks notice to their current employer. He does not try to undercut the current employer, but instead, reinforces the importance of that notice. He may try to work the new hire in on a shift or two, but he’s 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. 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 the employee provided advanced notice of departure and for what period. If an employee tells you he or she is quitting, ask him or her to work the next two weeks, if he or she will be a productive employee.

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 to advertise. Have your ad ready, the address of where to send it and a 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 decrease the risk of another one leaving.

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