
Farm Employee Management: The Job Interview, and What Questions Can I Ask?

Hiring good employees on the farm is a multi-step process. One of the most important steps in that process is interviewing the candidates for the position available. It is important to take the time to carefully prepare for interviewing these candidates.

Consider that when you are hiring an employee to come and work on your farm, you will be working with that person day after day. This is your opportunity to get to know that person and learn a little about what makes him or her tick before you make a commitment to one another – and you invest precious resources in that new employee. Remember, the investments that you make in human resources are perhaps the most significant investments you will make on the farm. Don't waste the time that you have together.

Well-prepared interviewers make a list of information that they want to share, as well as questions that they want to ask employment candidates. This helps to ensure that you don't overlook something important. It also helps you to evaluate and compare candidates since you are asking similar questions to each person.

In today's world, many potential employees may never have worked on a farm before. But you can still ask about other work experience. Find out what kinds of challenges they have faced in previous employment, and how they handled it. Some questions might be:

- Tell me about a job you had that you didn't like. What didn't you like about it? How did you deal with that?
- Tell me about a job duty in the past that you really enjoyed. What did you like about it? Why?
- Think about work supervisors you have had in the past. Was there someone that you really enjoyed working for? Why?

Employers in all industries – including agriculture – confirm that most problems with employees stem from workers who cannot get along with fellow workers or supervisors. When visiting with candidates, ask questions that will help you to learn about how the employee will work with others on your farm, for example:

- If I asked your past employers whether you were easy to get along with, what would they tell me? Why?
- Have you ever been in a work situation with a co-worker that you found hard to get along with? Why? How did you deal with that situation?
- Describe someone you worked with in the past that you really enjoyed working with.

Your new employees may have a great deal to learn about working on a farm operation. Try to get an idea about how they will approach learning new tasks.

- What do you do when you need to learn something new?
- Tell me about something new that you learned to do in the past two years, and how you went about learning that new skill.
- Have you ever helped someone learn to do a new task? Did you enjoy that? How did you go about it?

Some employers make the mistake of spending most of the interview talking, instead of listening. While it is important to make an outline of vital information that should be shared with potential employees, it is important to spend time listening to candidates. Don't do all the talking at the interview.

One of the most commonly asked questions about employee interviews is, "What questions can I legally ask?"

If you have taken the time to write a thoughtful position description, that document will provide significant guidance to you in planning your interview questions. For example, if one of the requirements of the position is work with feeding calves, ask them about experience they have had working with young animals – even if these were not farm animals. Ask if they have any thoughts about what signals might help them notice that a calf may be getting sick? If they have no idea, ask them how they might learn about that. If the person has past experience on a farm of any kind, you can ask many questions about those past experiences, equipment they have worked with, and the entire range of job duties in the farm operation.

If there are physical requirements of the position, such as lifting heavy items or standing for long periods of time, you can ask questions related to those tasks. For example, you can say, “This job may require you to lift 50-pound sacks of feed or 80-pound bales of alfalfa. Are you able to perform those tasks?” But don’t just look at a person who may appear small in stature and mentally disqualify them for the position. And remember, the person may have other more important traits such as attention to sanitation details or recognizing an animal that is off-feed. It is easier to accommodate lifting tasks than to try to teach other skills that may be more important in the overall qualifications to work with your valuable livestock.

Essentially, go over the position description with the candidate. Ask the individual to describe past education or experience that will help him or her to perform the listed tasks on your farm.

Describe working conditions, days, and hours to be worked and flexibility required. Then ask specifically if the person is able to work those hours, and if they are able to come in to work with short notice. Do not ask questions like, “Do you have children - and if so, what are your child care

arrangements?” Rather, just ask, “If a person who is scheduled to work doesn’t show up or calls in sick, we may need to call other employees to come in and cover that shift. Would you be able to do that on short notice?”

Don’t ask employment candidates if they own a car. Simply ask the person if they have a reliable method to get to work. If duties of the position will require the employee to drive one of your farm vehicles, you will need to determine whether the individual has a valid driver’s license – either a regular license or a CDL, as may be required. You can certainly ask about this, and verify at the time of an employment offer and acceptance.

Do not ask questions about an individual’s age, race, religion, politics, family, or marital status. These inquiries simply have nothing to do with the job requirements that should be found in the written position description. And there are so many other, better questions that will actually help you get to know a person and his or her likes, dislikes, and personality. A few suggestions:

- What do you like to do in your spare time?
- Do you have any hobbies, interests?
- What movies, books, or music do you enjoy?
- Are you a sports fan? What kind of sports do you enjoy watching or participating in?

These kinds of questions help you to get to know a potential employee.

Finally, give the candidate time to ask questions of you. Employers can learn a great deal about a person from the types of questions they ask – and hopefully they have some questions for you. At the end of the interview, tell the candidate what your decision process is going to be. If you intend to narrow the field and bring back one or two candidates for a second interview, let them know that. If you need to know how soon they could start employment, be sure to ask that question.

Farm Employee Management Series

The complete [Farm Employee Management Series](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm/wdhumanresources.html) can be found on the Ag Decision Maker website at www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm/wdhumanresources.html.

- C1-70 Get the Right Start in Hiring Employees
- C1-71 The Job Interview, and What Questions Can I Ask?
- C1-72 Do We Need an Employee Handbook?
- C1-73 Assembly of Farm Job Descriptions
- C1-74 Put Job Descriptions to Work on Your Farm
- C1-75 Evaluation and Selection of Job Candidates
- C1-76 Getting the New Employee Off to a Good Start on Day One
- C1-77 Employment Eligibility Verification–The Basics of Form I-9 Compliance
- C1-78 New Employee Orientation
- C1-79 Farm Safety and Hiring Youth on the Farm
- C1-80 Applicant Background Checks
- C1-81 Terminating Employees in Iowa
- C1-82 Health, Stress, and Well-Being
- C1-83 Avoid Employment Pitfalls
- C1-84 Five Steps to Formulate Workforce Contingency Plans
- C1-85 Protect Farm Workers from Heat-Related Stress and Illness

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