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The recruitment of farm labour

by D. A. J. UPTON

Agro-Management Consultants Limited

FARMERS, like most people in other industries, have difficulty in selecting the right people for the right job. This paper sets out to establish the basic principles of recruitment and selection which have been effectively practiced by Agro Management Consultants Limited in agriculture for a number of years. The techniques proposed in the paper are simple, well proven and can be used equally well by the owner recruiting a farm manager or a farmer recruiting his own staff.

The drift from the land is not new, but recent increases in the migration of agricultural workers can only mean a shortage of quality labour in the near future. The national farm labour force has fallen by 50 per cent during the past 20 years. During this period labour use has declined by an average of 18,700 workers a year, as shown in Table I. The outflow of workers is much higher than it was 20 years ago. During the five years prior to 1968 the annual rate of decline of male workers was twice that of the previous five year period. The loss of 374,000 agricultural workers during the past 20 years has been partly offset by increases in farm size, rationalisation, mechanisation and technical innovation. With the advent of these factors, the need for skilled labour as opposed to the traditional general farm worker is more critical than ever before.

Although the costs of recruiting farm staff by formal methods may appear expensive, it is worth considering the high costs of poor selection. These costs must include; recruitment costs for the man and his replacement; initial training and management supervision costs; loss in morale within the enterprise; loss in output and profits; incalculable long term damage which may affect the farming enterprise; loss in time.

To take an example, a member of the farm staff's 'life' with a farming enterprise could be 25 years. On this basis the owner could be investing well over £50,000 in the man. A little care and extra cost involved in finding the right man will be amply repaid.

Before commencing any recruitment and selection activity the owner should ask himself a number of questions. These should include:

1. Have I a sound farm policy?
2. What is the purpose of the job—is it fulfilling its purpose?

3. Could it be combined with another job?
4. Can I learn any lessons from the last incumbent?
5. Is a replacement available on the farm or locally?
6. Is morale among the existing staff good—and are they properly led?
7. Am I providing adequate remuneration for the team and are working conditions satisfactory?

If the owner is satisfied that recruitment is essential, the recruitment procedures should commence at once. Recruitment and selection is a process of matching people against pre-determined specifications, and falls into four stages—1, Analysing the job; 2, attracting the candidate; 3, evaluating the candidate; 4, appointment and career development.

Analysing the job

The first stage is an analysis of the job in as objective fashion as possible. Job analysis is a method of getting a clear appraisal of the status, authorities and responsibilities for the job. The job analysis will provide the information for a description of the job. From this the job specification is formed. The headings in the job analysis pro-forma include:

Status. Who will the man be responsible to and for whom will he himself be responsible?

Authority. What authority goes with the job? What authority does the holder have for expenditure or for collecting cash? What authority has he to organise his own work, etc? Has he authority to hire or fire?

Responsibilities. Search out all the matters for which the man is immediately responsible.

Job information. What is he expected to do?

What is entailed in doing the job? Each factor involved in the performance of the job should be analysed. Are there special problems?

Salary and incentive. The salary range which the job carries must be established. Also what financial incentive there is to a good job performance and the prospects of advancement. What are the conditions of service?

Training. Probe the precise extent of the training which is necessary in order to enable the man to do the job. Does the man need special qualification necessary for further training?

Supervisory position. What degree of supervision does the man need to do this job? What type of supervision is involved? If he is to be a manager to what extent does he supervise other people?

When the job analysis has been completed there will be sufficient material for a detailed description of the job. This is known as the job specification. The job specification answers three important questions. These are: 1, to whom will the man be responsible?; 2, what authority has he?; 3, what responsibilities has he?

The job specification expresses the job quite explicitly. There can be no doubt in the mind of the job holder or his employer as to precisely what is required in the job. The man to whom the job holder is responsible is clearly stated, thus avoiding the common situation where one man has too many bosses. It also avoids the intolerable situation which occurs in many companies where people find they have total responsibility for carrying out a job, but are not given the necessary authority to make the job possible.

The man specification describes the ideal man (if he could be created) to do the job. It is essentially a yardstick against which applicants for the position can be matched. The most common classification of readily identifiable human attributes was drawn up by Professor Alec Rodger, and is known as the seven-point plan.

He lists seven characteristics which form the basis of the man specification. These are: physical make-up; attainments; intelligence; character and disposition; circumstances; special aptitudes; interests.

By using these headings, the farmer can build for himself a very clear picture of the man most suited to carry out the job well before he even places an advertisement.

Attracting the candidate

The principal recruiting methods which can be used are: 1, search your own organisation for a suitable replacement; 2, advertise; 3, watch out for good men made redundant by mergers or a change in policy; 4, search the farm institutes and agricultural colleges; 5, use consultants or external sources of recruitment.

The objective of good selection procedures is to establish a method which is free from bias. The method should enable the farmer to: match applicants against the man specification, determine whether candidates can fulfil the job specification and determine whether the selected candidate will be compatible with his superiors, subordinates and colleagues.

The purpose of the recruiting process is to enlarge the field for selection. The purpose of drawing up screening standards is to reduce the field so that it shall not be too unwieldy and so that worthless appli-

cations may be quickly dispensed with. Interviewing should be designed to produce a short list of say three candidates, who may be considered from the point of view of compatibility.

Copy writing and media selection

No amount of interviewing will produce high calibre employees from poor candidates. It is essential to encourage good people to reply to your advertisements. It is also necessary to have replies of the appropriate type.

There are five main requirements of a written advertisement: It must attract the reader; explain the type of man and experience required; explain the reason for the appointment, the type of enterprise and at what level the new man will join; indicate the salary, terms, conditions and prospects, and invite replies.

Attracting the reader is partly a question of layout, which will be dealt with later, but it is also a question of choosing the right heading. The object of the heading is to catch the eye of the right type of candidate and make him want to read on. This is usually achieved by the use of two or three words in large type. If the enterprise is likely to be well known by applicants and has a good name for progress or staff conditions, the use of the enterprise name will help.

The words used in the heading, or banner headline, must be chosen carefully. It is sometimes sufficient to simply name the position, which in turn indicates the person you want. Examples would be: "Farm Manager", "Management Assistant", "Herd Manager"—and so on. It is better if an aspect that makes the job stand out as attractive to the people likely to be interested can be included. For example: "Farm manager—up to £3,000", "Newly qualified Management Assistant", "Herd manager for top herd".

If the salary is above average it should be included in the headline. An alternative policy is to indicate in the headline the type of activity the person will be involved in. For example: "Farm manager—3,000 acres", "Management assistant—fruit and hops", "Herd manager—Ayrshires".

This has the effect of increasing the interest of casual readers who are already working in a similar job or who feel they would like to, while excluding immediately those who do not. Yet another item that can appear in the headline is the location if this is generally recognised to be desirable. It will also increase the interest of people already living in the area or who would like to move there.

The other way in which readers can be attracted by what is said in the advertisement is if the points made about the company and the job are those which will interest the type of applicant you require. If, for example, a highly motivated self starting individual is required, stress the potential of the job, freedom of action, promotion and earning prospects. If a

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steady type is needed, stress job security, good working conditions, pension arrangements and so on.

A person reading an advertisement wants to know very quickly whether or not he is likely to be considered for the job if he applies. Age, experience and salary are usually the key factors in this area. If a particular type of experience is needed it is important to say so. Similarly with age and salary level.

Many farmers assume that all they have to do is to announce that they require someone. Potential candidates need to know more than that. They want to know why the appointment is being made. Is it a new appointment or is it replacing another employee? If it is to replace another employee was he a success and is perhaps being promoted, or was he a failure and the enterprise is in a run down condition.

A survey of all recruitment advertising in national newspapers conducted by S. H. Benson, the advertising agency, concluded that the salary was stated in only 44 per cent of advertisements. The reasons most often given for not stating salary are that the company wants to remain free to receive applications from men earning various salaries and to consider each applicant on merit. A second reason is that the company does not want to disclose the salary either to applicants, outsiders or people within the company.

Unfortunately potential applicants will try and guess what the salary is if it is not stated. If they think it might be low, or are suspicious of the enterprise's motives in not stating it, they will not reply. The advertisers will also receive applications from people of low calibre because they were not aware of the level of salary. This wastes everyone's time.

As a general rule it is always best to state salary. It will help to encourage more applications from people at the desirable level. If it is felt undesirable to state an exact figure the range or lowest figure should be indicated.

Terms and conditions must be stated. These are becoming more standardised in recent years, but there is always a danger that if, for instance, an advertisement does not mention pension arrangements, potential applicants will assume there isn't one. The same applies to special benefits, such as car or extended holidays or special conditions such as extensive travelling. It is better to state these things than leave them to the imagination.

Prospects are a rather special case. Try and avoid the hackneyed phrase 'prospects are excellent'. It has become almost meaningless. If prospects are good indicate what they are in a more definite way.

Make it easy for applicants to apply. Invite them to telephone for details or an application form. If they are asked to write giving full details of career, age and so on, deal with replies promptly and in an efficient way. Try and avoid duplicated rejection slips.

Take the opportunity of doing some public relation and write a friendly note to rejected candidates. Above all encourage them to telephone a named individual to discuss the job rather than ask candidate to write giving details.

There are two other important aspects of recruitment advertisements. They are choice of words and layout.

A double column advertisement four inches deep will cost about £200 in a national newspaper, and between £25 and £50 in a trade journal or local newspaper. Space is therefore expensive and must be used to best advantage.

The maximum number of words of copy that will fit into a four inch double column without looking cramped is about 180.

The secret of good copy writing is to make every word count. Make sure that every word and phrase expresses some point that will help readers to identify the attractions of the position. Use words and phrase that make the position sound attractive, but avoid over expressive adjectives like 'wonderful' or 'marvellous'. Avoid clichés, such as 'this is an excellent opportunity for a first class man'. Ensure that the complete advertisement is easy to read and is clear and precise. Try and make the wording different from that used by other companies who are currently advertising similar positions. Finally, avoid repetition of the same words.

A well laid out advertisement should be easily spotted among others, should look attractive, be easy to read and business like.

The first duty of an advertisement is to attract and interest the casual reader. The choice of words in the banner headline are important in this respect as has already been mentioned. The advertisement must also be of sufficient size to compete with the others on the page. It must also look easy to read quickly.

Key factors are that it must not be cramped, it should be divided into paragraphs of about 50 words and the sentences should be short. A range of between 10 and 20 words a sentence is considered correct.

Media selection

Considerable expense is involved in advertising in a national newspaper. This can easily be wasted money if the wrong media is selected. There is one question which the advertiser must ask. "Is the paper I intend to use the one that a man of the type that I want will read when looking for a job?" The answer might be a local paper, a periodical such as the Farmer's Weekly or a national newspaper.

Another problem is whether it is better to advertise in the classified columns or use display. Display advertisements produce a higher response in number of replies. They must therefore be better value in the majority of cases. Classified advertisements are much cheaper and can be very effective in certain cases, as

for instance with the lower paid jobs. A position of importance must, however, be given the widest possible coverage and well displayed so that it catches the eye of the casual reader who would not normally be looking for a job. In general it is recommended

that advertisers should use display advertisements as the additional cost will invariably be more than repaid.

An example of a good advertisement is shown below.

ASHORNE FARMS LIMITED

FARM MANAGER—Warwickshire

A Farm Manager will be required in April for this profitable 2,600 acre farm. The vacancy will occur because of the retirement of the present manager after many years' service. The successful candidate will have at least five years' experience of profitable farm management.

What is Offered

1. Starting salary up to £2,000 with annual review.
2. A profit sharing scheme after one year.
3. Fully modernised house, rent and rates free, within easy reach of a large town.
4. A farm vehicle of any choice.
5. Freedom to get on with the job.
6. Three weeks' holiday, pension scheme and life insurance.

If you would like to discuss this important position, please telephone the owner, Leslie Lowfold, on Sunday June 30, between 9 a.m. and 9 p.m., at Ashorne 954597. You may reverse the charges if you wish. Alternatively, write to Ashorne Farms Limited, Ashorne, Warwickshire.

What is Wanted

1. A self starter between 30 and 40.
2. Preferably a College or Farm Institute qualification.
3. Experience in arable management, but an interest in breeding sows.
4. Prior experience of profitable farm management.

As will be seen, this advertisement is a distillation of both the job and man specifications. There are a number of other factors which make it a successful advertisement. 1, The size and geographic location of the farm is clearly stated; 2, the reason for the appointment and the likely security of the job is indicated; 3, the background of suitable candidates is detailed; 4, a number of clear benefits to applicants are listed. It should be noted that the "what is offered" column outweighs the "what is wanted" column!; 5, the advertisement is clear, concise and no words are wasted; 6, the advertisement positively encourages applicants to contact the owner personally to talk the job over. Obvious misfits, or totally unsuitable applicants, can be politely rejected by explaining that the job is not likely to prove suitable for them; 7, the layout looks good, with plenty of white space highlighting the written word; 8, all the benefits listed are sufficiently attractive to

make this look a good job although the salary is by no means excessive by present standards.

Assessing the candidate

As a result of the advertising campaign or other informal means, the farmer will gather together a number of applicants. Their apparent experience, background and qualifications should be carefully matched against the job and man specifications. In this manner a "short list" of the three or four most suitable candidates will be discovered. They should be invited to attend for interview. Plenty of time should be allowed for this. If the advertisement has been good, and the job and man specifications are realistic and accurate, the farmer's only job will be to establish which sort of the short listed candidates will be most compatible to his enterprise. However, before he can do this, it will be necessary to inter-

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view the candidates. The following notes are a guide to the art of interviewing.

The interview is designed to perform two functions: (a) to determine the relevance of the applicant's experience and training to the demands of a specific job, and, (b) to evaluate his personality, character and motivation.

Interviews fall into one of three types: direct, indirect and structured.

With the direct interview the interviewer is solely concerned with firing a direct barrage of questions—in other words a 'question and answer' approach. This type of interview is useful in compiling a mass of factual information. The disadvantage is that no attempt is made to probe the character of the candidate in terms of motivation or personality.

The interviewer in the indirect type makes no attempt to control the interview. The candidate is 'given his head'. The interviewer merely makes the odd comment. The idea behind this type of interview is that the candidate will reveal valuable information about his attitudes and personality. The major disadvantage is that it is impossible to cover all the important areas of his background within a reasonable space of time. The interviewer will be compelled to make a decision on a basis of incomplete information.

The structured interview is a combination of the above methods. The interviewer is in full control but the candidate is encouraged to talk freely about relevant topics. The interviewer obtains information in an indirect manner without giving the applicant the feeling that he is being 'put on the spot'.

The interview is structured in the sense that it covers specific areas and follows a logical sequence, but it is not at all mechanical or stereotyped. The less talking the interviewer has to do the more successful he is likely to be. Ideally, the interviewer should do only 10 to 15 per cent of the talking. The rest of the time he should be analysing the candidate's remarks.

The object should be to let the candidate talk in a relaxed and permissive atmosphere. For this reason great care should be paid to creating the right atmosphere. The following points should be considered: 1. The interview should be conducted in private; 2, there should be no interruptions; 3, ideally there will be no telephone in the room; 4, avoid a large desk—it creates a barrier. A coffee table and a pair of comfortable chairs will help build the desirable relaxed atmosphere; 5, have cigarettes and an ash tray available; 6, greet each candidate warmly, introduce yourself and do everything possible to put him at ease; 7, start the interview with a few moments of 'small talk'.

It is a good idea to explain to the candidate that the discussion will include as much relevant information as possible about job history, education, early home life and so on. This is the right time to start checking the candidate's job history against his appli-

cation form. He will have the advantage of covering familiar ground which will help his confidence.

The good interviewer creates increased confidence by appearing to agree with everything the applicant says. Brief comments such as "I see", "very interesting" do not interrupt the flow of information from the candidate, but give a feeling of responsiveness. The skilled interviewer gives praise whenever possible. Comments such as "You did a good job there", "very good" will give the candidate the happy feeling that his achievements have been recognised and he will become more forthcoming as a result.

It is important that the applicant is encouraged to divulge unfavourable information as well as favourable information. It is possible that a man has failed his final year examinations at university. Get the information and then help him save face by some remark as, "well, it can happen to the best of us. Academic qualifications are not the be all and end all anyway". In other words the applicant realises that the interviewer is in sympathy and finds it easier to discuss other unfavourable information as the interview develops.

It is no use asking questions like "Did you do well at school?" The candidate will realise that an answer in the affirmative is expected and will quite naturally say "yes". Ask a question like "what about examinations. Were they average, above average or below average?" This sort of question will encourage a more favourable response than a leading question such as "what were the results in your final examination?"

The interviewer should make sure that he is 'getting through' to the candidate. He should study the candidate's vocabulary, degree of sophistication and intelligence. It is important that he is talking the same 'language' as the candidate.

It is also important to avoid putting the candidate on the defensive by asking over blunt questions. Use phrases like: "Is it possible that", "would you say that", "how was it", "has there been any opportunity to", "what prompted you to", "what is your opinion on".

Matching against specification

The interviewer should have a thorough working knowledge of the job for which he is selecting applicants. He will have a job and man specification against which he will match the experience and qualifications of the candidate. The man specification is of particular significance to the interviewer. Remember that the man specification is a profile of the ideal man for the job. In the appraisal of the candidates it is quite likely that no individual will possess all the desirable attributes. The interview that brings to light no unfavourable information is quite possibly a poor interview. The interviewer's job is, therefore to find the applicant who has the most desirable qualifications for the job.

A typical structured interview form will probably consist of some 70 questions. The interviewer will ask certain of these questions which are intended to lead the candidate into free discussion on his basic motivations. The apparently harmless questions will provide the skilled interviewer with important information.

Typical questions from a structured interview form, probing a man's military service, might include these:

Question	Interviewer's Guide
Did you volunteer for any special services? Accepted?	Impulsive? Rash
How long? Did you leave at your own request?	Imagination?
	Application?
How did you get on with superiors? Subordinates? Equals?	Conflict or co-operation?

Using and interpreting the structured interview form is undoubtedly the most effective method of discovering what makes the candidate 'tick'. Care must be taken to ensure that the probing questions are blended carefully into the relaxed framework of the interview.

It will be necessary to terminate interviews of two types of candidates. These are the unqualified or totally unsuited candidate, and the qualified candidate.

The unqualified or totally unsuited candidate should have been screened out by other methods (application form, telephone screening, etc.) prior to the interview. However, it does frequently become apparent at an early stage in the interview that a candidate may be totally unsuited for the position. In such cases the interview should be terminated as soon as possible.

The objective of the interviewer should be mainly directed towards doing a good public relations job for his farm. He should talk in general terms about the farm rather than in specific terms such as salary levels. The unsuccessful candidate should leave the interview room with a feeling of high regard for the farm. It is wise to notify unsuccessful candidates by post rather than verbally. This is not only courteous but gives an impression of careful consideration. The reason for the rejection should be phrased in terms of the job demands rather than in terms of the individual's personal qualifications. It is far easier for an individual to face up to the fact that his experience or training does not quite fit the job than it is for him to admit that he does not qualify because of personal characteristics.

Although the interviewer normally has the authority to reject candidates, he does not always have the authority to engage them. Even when he finds an outstanding candidate, he must beware of transmitting his enthusiasm to the man. He should express interest in his qualifications and tell him that he feels sure that the owner would like to talk to him.

The interviewer does, however, have an important responsibility to his employer when he meets a candidate close to specification. He should sell the candidate the job by pointing out how closely he matches the specification and how suitable his qualifications are. He must be careful not to oversell the job too much as this could lead to eventual disappointment.

There are three common interviewing errors. These are:

1. **Failure to follow the structured interview.** Interviewing is like a selling operation. It is important to formulate a plan and then stick to it!
2. **Backing 'hunches'.** It is sad but true that far too many interviewers are prone to jump to conclusions. Many people have their judgment clouded by first impressions. This can be a dangerous—and expensive—mistake in selection.
3. **The 'halo' effect.** It is a dangerous mistake to allow a single prominent characteristic to overshadow all others. It may well be that we become very favourably impressed with a man's immaculate appearance, so much so that we tend to attribute other characteristics such as good time-keeping, care and competence, trustworthiness and so on, to him. In other words, his outstanding appearance has cast a halo round him masking other characteristics.

Appointment and career development

After interviewing, and further cross checking against the job and man specification, the farmer should have little difficulty in offering an appointment to the most suitable short listed candidate. A letter offering the job should be sent to him, defining the terms of employment, the date he will be required to start work and so on. The letter should state quite clearly that the offer is subject to satisfactory references. These should be checked immediately, preferably before a letter is sent to the rejected candidates. This is done for one of two reasons: firstly, the appointed candidate may turn down the job, and secondly, his references may prove unsatisfactory.

When letters are sent to the rejected candidates, they must be courteous, thank them for sparing the time to come for interview and contain any travelling expenses if these were not paid at the time of interview, which is preferable.

Telephone reference checking is preferable to relying on written references. The successful applicant should be asked for the name and telephone number of the person he was responsible to in previous jobs. Written references are normally so guarded as to be almost valueless. On the other hand, a telephone call to the man's previous employer will invariably provide a great deal of valuable information on his ability, personality and the true reasons for him leaving that particular position. Under no circumstances should references be taken up without the candidate's permission.

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College or Farm Institute qualifications should be checked. Bursars are always helpful in this respect.

Once the man is appointed, his progress should be monitored according to his job specification which should be updated as necessary. Every effort should be made to assist him develop his career. Attention to this matter will enable the farmer to retain a labour force in a high degree of morale. Questions which the successful farmer will ask himself are:

"Am I making the best use of the talent already working for me and have I made sufficient provision for the future?"

"Are my employees satisfied that I am helping them fulfil their job, and at the same time helping them develop their own careers?"

There are a number of things which an employer can do to keep his labour force happy and profitable. These include: staff development; "broadening" of the individual's job; building in external or "on the job" training as the job develops; regular performance appraisal to overcome individual weaknesses and develop the strong points; planning individual payment systems as part of the overall career plan; recognising that people are different and taking steps to deal with the problems caused by the "high flier", the very ambitious and the reliable but steady plodder.

Recruitment of farm staff is not difficult provided a clearly thought out plan is carefully followed. By taking the steps outlined in this paper, the owner can make an invaluable contribution towards maximising the human resources available to him in today's difficult labour market.

Table I

CHANGES IN AGRICULTURE'S USE OF HIRED LABOUR IN ENGLAND AND WALES 1948-68

	Regular Whole-time Workers		Regular Part-time Seasonal/Temporary		Total Hired Workers	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Total 1948 (000's)	506.5	66.2	110.6 *	58.2	617.1	124.4
Total 1968 (000's)	243.1	19.4	53.7	51.1	296.8	70.6
Difference	-263.4	-46.8	-56.9	-7.1	-320.3	-53.8
Annual Average Change (000's)						
1948-1953	-6.4	-4.1	-1.3	+0.1	-7.6	-2.5
1953-1958	-15.1	-2.5	-2.5	+1.6	-17.6	-0.9
1958-1963	-13.5	-1.6	-2.5	-1.1	-4.0	-2.6
1963-1968	-17.7	-1.1	-5.1	-2.0	-24.9	-3.1
1948-1968 Total	-13.2	-2.3	-2.8	-0.4	-16.0	-2.7

Source: Agricultural Census.

*Includes 11.4 thousand prisoners of war