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**AG HELP WANTED:  
GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING AGRICULTURAL LABOR**

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## **AG HELP WANTED: GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING AGRICULTURAL LABOR**

### **Abstract**

*Ag Help Wanted is an educational guidebook designed to assist every person who currently manages or expects to manage human resources on farms, ranches, nurseries, dairies, and other agricultural operations. The book can be used as a source of ideas for improving management policies or practices, an occasional reference in coping with problems that arise, or a base for systematic study of human resource management in agriculture. It presents principles, practical examples, regulatory considerations, and leads to more references that all help equip managers to make choices that are reasonable, legal, and ultimately effective for both their businesses and the people they employ.*

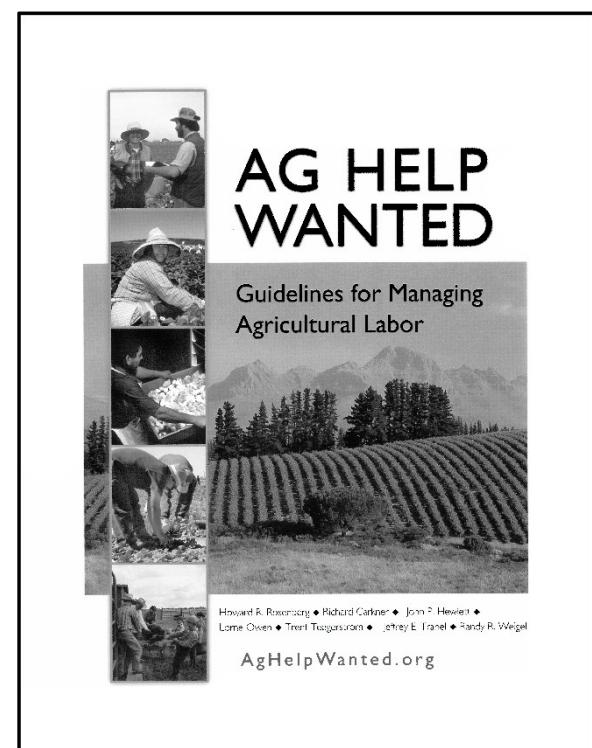
*Ag Help Wanted components include: the Ag Help Wanted guidebook in both printed and digital (PDF) formats and an online companion website (AgHelpWanted.org) that provides: links to book content, content highlights (English/Spanish), support links to federal, state, and other supporting agency documents/websites, and video clips offering nine sets of brief vignettes that illustrate approaches to one-on-one communication in problem work situations.*

**Keywords:** Agricultural Labor, Labor Management, Labor Relations

## Introduction

*Ag Help Wanted: Guidelines for Managing Agricultural Labor (Ag Help Wanted)*, is written with the primary objective of providing practical assistance to managers of agricultural labor. The authors are a group of Extension specialists from across the western United States (Arizona, California, Colorado, Washington, Wyoming) and Canada (British Columbia) and published by the Western Farm Management Extension Committee. The full-color, 242-page handbook is divided into six chapters covering the gamut of labor management issues: 1. Roles and Responsibilities of an Agricultural Employer, 2. Organizational Planning, 3. Staffing the Farm Business, 4. Supervising Agricultural Work, 5. Managing Employee Performance, and 6. Communication and Problem Solving.

The introduction acknowledges how essential labor and labor management is to agricultural production. “Amidst concerns of competition from domestic and offshore producers, scrutiny of cautious lenders, services for sale from various vendors, tastes and preferences of discriminating consumers, and requirements of voluminous laws, farmers and ranchers are running businesses. Virtually all of them need to procure and manage labor. Of course, other resources—land, plants, animals, water, machinery, tools, and chemicals—are also important, but without the abilities and efforts of people in the industry, agriculture would not yield food or fiber.”



The word “guidelines” in the title refers to the many practical illustrations, descriptions of managers’ experience, research-based principles and analytical concepts that are included. Examples throughout the book illustrate management concepts, suggest ways for avoiding or dealing with common problems, and provide points of comparison for readers reviewing their own operations and practices. A separate section titled Ideas in Practice offers the stories of several farm and ranch employers

that have improved operational results, reduced risks, or both through better labor management.

## **Chapter 1. Roles and Responsibilities of an Agricultural Employer**

Owners and managers of agricultural businesses often view themselves primarily as business people and give little thought to their roles as employers. Yet, managing people up and down the line in agricultural operations is worth doing well. Most individuals who accept the role of human resource manager find that it brings them a new set of professional challenges and personal pressures.

Manager decisions and behavior reflect a personal philosophy built from past experiences and observations. All managers have a theory of management that influences how they carry out their duties, although most have spent little time reflecting on the substance of that theory. Management theory in this sense is a partial explanation of how and why something or someone behaves, reacts, or responds under certain conditions. It may include assumptions, views, concepts, and ideas about causal linkages that help predict the results of possible management actions.

Agricultural producers who manage personnel must understand human behavior, organizations, laws, labor markets, technologies, and the whole of their business situation. They need information beyond what they can acquire through firsthand experience. Most, however, face the dilemma of little time available for further study, due to an abundance of day-to-day challenges with which they could better cope if they were more knowledgeable about the alternatives available.

## **Chapter 2. Organizational Planning**

Human resource management begins with an overall business plan. Company characteristics, such as business purpose, form of ownership, commodities produced, and acreage or scale of operation, have an influence on organization structure, the feel of the work environment, and the approach to labor management. To paraphrase management theorist Peter Drucker, every organization needs to operate from a “theory of itself as a business,” covering three fundamental dimensions: its environment, its mission, and its core competencies. Such working knowledge is the

basis for setting realistic business goals and planning strategies to achieve them, including hiring and maintaining labor resources.

All business operations have a “structure” of roles, relationships among them, and rules that facilitate the division and coordination of work. Any organizational structure can benefit from review and adjustment from time to time, preferably before a crisis demands it. How much labor of what type is needed and when? How much is needed during various seasons? Taking careful stock of business labor requirements, the current workforce, and your own skills should yield a good sense of the match between organizational needs and current staffing. It is also important to assess managerial capacity. Self-analysis isn’t easy, but it is incumbent on every manager and is part of an employer’s assessment of management resources in a farm business.

Operating within legal bounds is a clear mandate. Management of human resources on U.S. farms and ranches is no longer only about dealing with workers. Relationships among people who provide and procure labor to make the system run – farm business owners and operators, employees, and contractors – are subject to a large set of public rules that apply to all but are well comprehended by only a few. The creation of new obligations specific to agriculture have placed it among the most heavily regulated of U.S. industries. As a result, business owners and managers should give much thought about the relationship between the organizational plan and the human resources available to help carry it out.

### **Chapter 3. Staffing the Farm Business**

Agricultural businesses are organizations structured to produce food and fiber. Viewed from another perspective, they are collections of people completing various tasks necessary for business success; and it matters who those people are. But how do agricultural managers decide who should do what? Except perhaps for owner operators and their family members, people do not usually turn-up working on farms through their own choice.

Farmer operators routinely make choices about where to look for laborers, the process for evaluating potential workers, and selecting who they hire. Furthermore, the performance of the farm business as a whole depends on the capabilities and

motivations of all the people who work in it, making employee selection one of the most important dimensions of personnel management.

Another confounding aspect of worker selection is that performance-related knowledge and skills are not evenly distributed across the workforce. People have different skills and backgrounds that translate into different levels of ability in different types of jobs. The central objective of employee recruitment and selection is to put capable people into jobs for which they are qualified and likely to do their best work most of the time.

The recruitment and selection process are the beginning of worker orientation. Through this process employees acquire information and make their impression about how they will perform on the job. A well-planned orientation accelerates new hire development and shortens the time to reach the productivity level desired. A complete orientation covers filling out needed personnel forms, learning about job duties from the supervisor and coworkers, reviewing the company handbook, taking a look at the surroundings, meeting coworkers, and beginning work activities.

## **Chapter 4. Supervising Agricultural Work**

Few farmers and ranchers turn biological material and processes into marketable products alone. Hired workers, family members, or a combination of both make it happen with their hands and their minds. Whether engaged directly by crop growers, livestock producers, labor contractors, or other service providers, they work under an influence called “supervision.” Some agricultural operators are not even in contact with the employees they hire to perform work. The sheer size of their organizations, if not location and language differences between them and production workers, necessitates one or more intermediate levels of management. Supervisory influence for their employees comes from managers closest to the production level.

Employees who supervise are the agents of their employer in managing workers regardless of the name – foreman, crew leader, majordomo, first-line supervisor, etc. From the worker’s point of view, the first-line supervisor is the principal point of contact, and is often taken to be the employer. In some cases, supervisors are given so much autonomy that he or she is the one who makes the employment decisions. In all their dealings, supervisors affect whether or not capable workers are attracted to the

business, whether they stay as long as desired by the employer, and how well those workers perform.

Good supervision of employees on farms and ranches is essential to the successes of the businesses. Good supervisors are able to lead their workers, identify issues, and delegate tasks and responsibilities in order to meet the needs of the operation.

## **Chapter 5. Managing Employee Performance**

Performance management is a broad concept, encompassing all communication between a manager and an employee. It must include exchanges about what to do, how to do it, how well it was done, and how to improve performance next time. Most individuals want to do a good job. Poor performance can usually be traced to past experiences or current conditions that include some dimension of inequity, fatigue, failure, or mixed messages. Agricultural employers generally see better employee performance through proactive control of the organizational structure, supervisory processes, and other work conditions.

Worker performance that fails to meet expectations can generally be sorted into three causes: (1) “don’t know,” (2) “can’t do,” and (3) “won’t do.” The first is a matter of understanding, the second a lack of ability, and the third a matter of attitude. If workers are unsure about what is expected of them or do not know enough about other aspects of the operation, the manager must find ways of delivering the missing information. Opportunities to inform can be found in employee orientation, job descriptions, an employee handbook or written notices, rotation of job assignments, crew or staff meetings, and ongoing, informal communications.

Most people think of money and motivation as closely related in businesses. Employers pay dollars and expect employee motivation in return. Pay is not simply a business cost, however; it is also a management tool for influencing the performance of employees on the job. Although money is a valued incentive to action for workers, that does not necessarily mean it always stimulates the action managers want. What a compensation system actually pays for is what rational people work toward. For pay to motivate performance, the compensation system must be structured to provide more dollars for the desired performance.

Agricultural business operators cannot afford to be unconcerned with worker performance, and most people want to improve their own work and their lot. Accurate appraisals can help both employers and employees to pinpoint areas for extra effort and development. Perhaps the single most common defect in performance appraisal systems is weakness of the measuring instrument. All too often the instrument or rating form, focuses on areas other than work performance and therefore increases the opportunities for rater biases to operate. Clear definitions of not only the dimensions of performance but also different levels of performance help to minimize the occurrence of errors from appraiser bias.

## **Chapter 6. Communication and Problem Solving**

Information is the lifeblood of every organization. Communication with workers is integral to hiring and training, helping them understand the business and their role within it, assigning and coordinating work, learning their ideas and problems, building trust, and most other aspects of the working relationship between the employer and employees. Of course, communication among workers facilitates both performance and the social relationships that make the workplace more than simply where a job takes place.

Communication occurs through the spoken word, written word, and gestures (body language), and most managers use them all. Words on paper are often thought of as formal communications, often with legal implications. Informal, oral communications are more numerous, frequent, and ongoing. However, just because an exchange is oral, does not make it informal.

Selection interviews, performance evaluation meetings, presentations to the farm advisory board or owners, and verbal warnings can all be considered formal. When something is written, it is less likely to be recalled or understood differently by the sender, receiver, or third parties. A written record can be referred to and serve as a benchmark for similar communications in the future.

Effective communication occurs when the sender and receiver of a message both understand the message in the same way. Beliefs, expectations, hopes, and other thoughts of both parties affect the interpersonal communication process. Communication involves more than just talking. It also takes deciding on what to say

and how, listening, decoding both verbal and body signals, and checking back on the accuracy of interpretation.

### **Ideas In Practice**

Hired employees are particularly critical in western United States agriculture. While some labor is provided by farm and ranch owners, their family members, and cooperating neighbors, most production work is performed by hired employees. For too many farm business owners, the complexities of employment law, labor market dynamics, and interpersonal relations, compounded by their discomfort in dealing with people from a culture with which they are unfamiliar, ironically feed a reluctance to dig into the field of labor management.

The ideas and concepts offered in *Ag Help Wanted* are most useful when they are put into action. The Ideas in Practice section offers highlights of actual managers successfully applying good human resource concepts only to discover the many benefits to employee-employer relationships, as well as to the overall agricultural business.

### **Content Highlights**

*Ag Help Wanted* is a helpful guidebook for assisting with managing agricultural labor. However, at 242 pages, it can be a bit overwhelming to someone not familiar with its contents, even with the associated 7-page index. For this reason, the authors have also developed Content Highlights. One covering each of the six chapters, as well as the Ideas in Practice section. These four-page, full-color Highlights provide a brief overview of what to expect in each chapter of the book. In addition, they are available in both English and Spanish versions, to more-readily provide those involved in the agricultural workforce with a quick reference to *Ag Help Wanted* content.

### **AgHelpWanted.org**

*Ag Help Wanted: Guidelines for Managing Agricultural Labor* includes innumerable references to various agencies and resources available on the World Wide Web to assist the agricultural manager. These references and accompanying links are housed

at the companion web site [AgHelpWanted.org](http://AgHelpWanted.org). The supporting web pages offer several components to assist the ag labor manger, including:

- Short segments of digital book content (PDF), arranged by the Table of Contents listing of book topics.
- Content Highlights offered as four-page, full-color flyers in both English and Spanish language to provide a quick reference to materials covered in each book chapter.
- Support links for direct access to various U.S. federal agencies, western state departments of labor and associated regulations, and a host of other links to commodity organizations, educational resources, professional associations, and other supporting agency documents.
- Video clips offering nine sets of brief vignettes that illustrate approaches to one-on-one communication in problem situations. Each set includes one scene showing an apparent personnel problem and three scenes showing different supervisory responses to it. These videos help managers consider which management response may be best in a given situation.

These web pages go well beyond simply supporting the text; they provide a one-stop resource for labor management information.

*Ag Help Wanted* is also available in CD ROM or digital PDF format for greater portability. The digital versions allow the user to identify key phrases or words across chapters, using the native search feature of the free Adobe Acrobat reader program. A second digital supplement includes the material discussed in Chapter 6 and the nine sets of brief problem work situation vignettes. Both are available for order at <http://AgHelpWanted.org>.

## Conclusion

In spite of strides to improve and increase technologies in agricultural and horticultural production, the success of most individual farm operations still relies heavily on the productivity of their human resources. Effective management of employees translates directly into economic returns. The management of human resources in agriculture is complex and offers some unique characteristics when compared to human resource

management in other industries. Furthermore, this responsibility is often assumed by people with little formal training.

*Ag Help Wanted: Guidelines for Managing Agricultural Labor* is a book for the proactive agricultural manager addressing the waterfront of agricultural labor management issues. The companion website at AgHelpWanted.org provides references to many online resources, as well as access to book content, problem work situation videos, and industry links. While *Ag Help Wanted* may not make the task of managing agricultural laborers easy, it does boost the reader's confidence in understanding the issues and options available.