Pork Managers' Perception of Labor Management Practices and Their Risks

Vera Bitsch* and Nicole J. Olynk

*Contact Author
Department of Agricultural Economics, Michigan State University
306 Agriculture Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824-1039
Phone (517) 353-9192, Fax (517) 432-1800, Email: bitsch@msu.edu

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Extended Abstract

U.S. farmers are spending an increasing share of their expenses on hired labor (9.8% in 1997, 10.7% in 2002 according to the Census of Agriculture), which amounted to $18.6 billion of expenses in 2002. Managing labor is therefore becoming more important for farm operations' success. Whereas historically training and education for farm managers has focused on agricultural production management, there is a growing need for educational programs on labor management. However, few studies have been done to provide an empirical basis on how agricultural labor management differs from labor management in other industries and what specific needs agricultural managers have.

This study builds on several recent studies of labor management practices in agriculture with the objective of broadening the empirical basis of this prior work by targeting the pork industry with its growing farm sizes and labor specialization. In addition, this study seeks to further refine and expand the conceptual framework developed in those prior studies, categorizing management practices according to whether they are likely to increase or reduce labor risks faced by agricultural producers. While this study builds on prior work, it is exploratory in terms of its methods, focusing on industry participants' perceptions of their situation and needs. With the exception of work done by Hurley et al., little is known about labor management practices in pork production, specifically. Given that their study was a broad industry survey, not enough detailed information was collected to allow the development of targeted educational programs.

This study uses the focus group discussion method, which is defined by Morgan as a research method that collects data on a topic defined and structured by a researcher through group interaction. According to Krueger and Casey, focus group research is particularly useful

for informed decision making (e.g., pilot testing, formative evaluation, outcome evaluation), product or program development, customer satisfaction (e.g., design of survey instruments), planning and goal setting, conveying a client focus, needs assessment, developing and maintaining quality improvement efforts, understanding employee concerns, policy making and testing. Focus groups are used as either a standalone method or in conjunction with other methods, such as in-depth interviewing or survey research. In addition, focus groups can provide alternative perspectives to established models, be used to generate and formulate hypotheses, and for construct development. Compared to in-depth interviews, focus groups provide broader and richer data in a shorter amount of time, although at the expense of in-depth analysis of individual perspectives. Compared to survey research they provide more detailed and in-depth information, but are more time-consuming to analyze and cannot be generalized to the population because participants are not randomly selected and their numbers are typically relatively small.

Six focus group meetings were held, with four convened in Michigan and two in Kansas, consisting of managers from different hierarchical levels in pork production. These states were chosen because they have sizeable and similarly structured pork industries, allowing comparison. The Michigan set consisted of a small producer group, a large producer group, a contractor group, and a middle manager group; all were convened in August 2005. The Kansas groups consisted of managers and owners of different size operations and were held via phone conference in December 2005. The average group size was four participants.

All group discussions were tape-recorded and transcribed. As focus groups produce conversational data with answers referring to different topics located throughout the discussion and not limited to specific moderator questions, data analysis requires simultaneous review and comparison of a large amount of natural speech data. The analysis consists of labeling

participants' speech turns according to a scheme developed by the researchers based on previous research and the emerging results, which is called coding. Coding is iterative and typically consists of several rounds of data analysis. The ATLAS-TI software was used to support the data analysis, and to facilitate the maintenance and retrieval of the data. Code assignment is only tentative until all speech turns labeled with a specific code has been compared to all other data with the same or a similar code. When more than one researcher is involved in a study, the final decision on coding also requires discussion and agreement between all researchers involved.

The participants in the focus groups were mostly male, and the ratio of owners to hired managers was 3:1. Participants' ages ranged from early twenties to mid sixties and they had been in their current position between 3 months and 48 years (average 18 years). The number of farm employees ranged from 1 to 110 (average 28). The order of the result categories below is based on the amount of discussion dedicated to each labor management topic (number of speech turns in percent of total number of labor management speech turns) during the focus group discussions: (1) performance management, (2) compensation, (3) recruitment, (4) training, (5) working conditions and organizational structure of farms, (6) selection, (7) hiring immigrant employees, (8) discipline, (9) performance evaluation, (10) social environment, and (11) labor law. Labor management practices, labor attributes, and work characteristics were analyzed within each category and characterized as risk reducing or risk increasing, according to managers' perceptions. In a few instances, the researchers' perspective did not match managers' judgment.

An educational pilot workshop was developed based on the focus group discussions and delivered in both Michigan and Kansas. Topics covered in the workshops included recruitment and selection, training, employee evaluation, compensation, conflict management, discipline and

termination, communication, and motivation. The latter two topics, as well as conflict management covered issues discussed under performance management. Workshops were evaluated both immediately afterwards, through written anonymous workshop evaluations and through phone interviews several weeks later. While most participants were able to point to specific content learned and planned or had started to implement one or more changes, hoping to increase productivity and/or reduce costs, few were able to quantify the monetary value of those changes.

Introduction

In 2002, farmers in the U.S. spent $18.6 billion on hired labor, an over 20% increase since the previous census in 1997 (USDA). Due to an increasing share of the hired agricultural workforce being employed on larger farms, training and educational needs of managers are evolving. For these farms to be successful, managers must effectively manage their employees. As farm managers' time is no longer dominated by production related tasks, an increasing amount of time needs to be devoted to human resource management (HRM).

Historically training and education for farm managers has focused mainly on agricultural production management, and has provided few tools to utilize in HRM. Therefore, there is a need for educational programs for farm managers to focus on teaching the tools necessary to attract, select, and maintain a productive team of employees. Skills required to successfully perform these actions include paying attention to legal requirements and fair treatment of employees, assigning tasks, monitoring task performance, and building relationships with employees. Out of the multitude of required skills, farm managers may be least prepared to deal with the difficult situation where employees must be disciplined or terminated.

With HRM becoming more important, the risks stemming from these management tasks have also increased. Main sources of business risk include (1) production and yield risk, (2) price and market risk, (3) financial risk, (4) human resource risk, and (5) institutional, legal, and environmental risk (Baquet, Hambleton, and Jose; Harwood et al.; Musser and Patrick). The first three risk sources have been the focus of management personnel in production agriculture throughout the last century. Recently, livestock managers have devoted increasing attention to institutional, legal, and particularly environmental risks. For example, more stringent regulations for Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) and Animal Feeding Operations (AFOs) have led to increased awareness by livestock mangers of environmental regulations and their consequences for agricultural operations. On the other hand, the risks associated with human resources are often not explicitly recognized and planned for on farms (Bitsch and Harsh; Bitsch et al.). While farm managers are likely to seek outside advice on environmental or production related risks, they are less likely to recognize areas of weakness and seek expert advice in HRM. Farm employment differs from other industries because employees spend more hours working with owners and/or managers, the necessity to work holidays and weekends, and the increased probability of family members working alongside one another. These special circumstances can deter managers from seeking outside advice on HRM.

This study builds on a number of recent studies targeting HRM practices in agriculture, and farmers' risk perceptions with respect to HRM (Bitsch and Harsh; Bitsch et al.; Mugera and Bitsch). Bitsch and Harsh analyzed the risk-increasing and risk-reducing attributes of the agricultural labor situation and common HRM practices from the perspective of horticultural managers. Based on focus group discussions with greenhouse, tree nursery, and landscape managers, seven categories of HRM risks were suggested: recruitment and selection, training and

development, performance evaluation and discipline, careers and relationships, compensation packages, immigrant employees, and labor laws and regulations. Within each of these categories, participating managers identified risk-increasing attributes and practices, as well as, risk-reducing attributes and practices to address some of these risks.

Striving to replicate the study discussed above in animal agriculture, Bitsch et al. followed similar procedures to identify and compare HRM risks in dairy farming. They developed a framework for HRM risk analysis on dairy farms, structuring risk sources, intermediate outcomes on the individual and group levels, and farm level outcomes of inadequate HRM practices. This framework is useful in structuring research, as well as, in manager education and training. However, the multiple interactions between HRM practices, labor attributes, and intermediate outcomes and the lack of farm level data, make it difficult to identify causality chains and a quantitative approach.

Based on these results and after reviewing published studies of agricultural HRM, Mugera and Bitsch collected in-depth data through using a theoretical framework, the resource-based theory, to guide the case analysis of HRM practices on six dairy farms. The integration of HRM practices (e.g., recruitment, selection, training, and compensation) and their outcomes (e.g., voluntary turnover, termination) were explored. The case studies provided an illustration of the theory, positing that the HRM system is a potential source of sustained competitive advantage for dairy farms. Therefore the integration of different HRM practices is likely to be relevant to the overall labor risk in farm management. In terms of research approaches, one conclusion was that analyzing isolated HRM practices may not lead to valid results. Therefore, future studies will need to continue to take an integrated view of agricultural HRM.

This study sought to replicate the focus groups studies with horticultural managers and

dairy farmers with a different group of agricultural managers, namely pork producers. Pork production is part of animal agriculture and, therefore, was expected to be similar to dairy with regard to most, if not all HRM practices. However, pork production typically offers fewer opportunities for outdoor work and more standardized production processes than dairy production. Accordingly, the objectives of this article are to (1) identify HRM practices in pork production, and (2) adapt the HRM categories suggested by Bitsch and Harsh for horticultural operations to pork production and classify typical labor attributes and common HRM practices as risk-increasing or risk-reducing. By building on perceived needs of managers, uncovered risk-increasing and risk-reducing practices, and insights from HRM research and theory, the ultimate goal of this research was to develop generally applicable workshop modules for manager HRM training in agriculture. With production agriculture evolving, the skill sets managers need have changed and educational workshops must reflect this. Attributes and practices which increase or reduce risk must be identified so that risk-increasing practices can be altered, while risk-reducing practices can be taught and incorporated into the skill set of agricultural managers.

Methods

The data collection method used in this study was the focus group discussion. This research technique is particularly suited in exploratory research, in generating and formulating hypotheses, and in exploring beliefs, experiences, opinions, values, and concerns of research participants within their own perception system (Kitzinger and Balbour, 1999; Krueger and Casey, 2000; Millward, 2000). Thus, the use of focus group discussions allows the researchers to prioritize future research projects and help formulate research questions, as well as specific questions to be asked of future research participants. Examples of this process are the studies

discussed in the introductory section with case study research following focus group discussions. In exploratory research, the drawback of focus groups that results cannot be generalized to the population at large is outweighed by the advantage of utilizing participants who have an interest in the research question and personal experiences related to the subject matter.

The current study followed the focus group procedures outlined by Bitsch and Harsh, convening six focus groups with pork producers from two states, namely Michigan and Kansas. These states were chosen because they have sizeable, similarly structured, pork industries, which allow comparison between regions. Four stratified focus groups were convened with pork producers in Michigan in August 2005. This subset consisted of a small and a large producer group, a contractor group, and a middle manager group; all were facilitated by the same moderator and the authors co-moderated and observed.

The second subset of two focus groups was convened in Kansas. These groups consisted of owners and managers' of different size operations, and were held via phone conference in December 2005. The Kansas groups were moderated by an extension educator with whom participants were familiar and were observed by the Michigan personnel. All group discussions included multiple areas of HRM and lasted over two hours. The average group size of the pork producer focus groups was four participants.

All group discussions were tape-recorded and transcribed. In addition, participants were asked to fill out a short questionnaire providing additional information about themselves and their operations. As participants of focus group discussions produced data related to different research questions and unanticipated topics throughout a discussion and not only in response to a specific moderator question, the data analysis required the simultaneous review and comparison of a large amount of conversational data. To complete an analysis of this kind of data the

authors used a process called coding. Coding consisted of labeling participants' speech turns according to a scheme developed by the researchers to be able to retrieve and compare speech turns addressing similar topics. The ATLAS-ti software was used to support the coding and analysis process, and to facilitate the maintenance and analysis of the large amount of data collected. Utilization of software tended to increase the breath and depth, as well as, the reliability of the data analysis.

The initial coding scheme was based on results in the horticulture industry (Bitsch and Harsh) and in dairy production (Bitsch et al.), discussed in the introductory section. Through additional rounds of coding, the authors developed more specific codes iteratively. This process of code development and application increases code validity (Boyatzis, 1998). In the first round of coding the authors applied the coding scheme to the four Michigan pork groups. Authors then discussed the need to refine codes to represent participants' perspective as closely as possible. Codes were further refined in an additional round of coding. The codes were then applied to the Kansas focus groups. Based on this preliminary analysis, codes were revised to better fit the emerging insights. After applying the revised codes to the Kansas groups, the authors discussed any remaining coding differences and then re-coded all Michigan groups.

Results and Discussion

Twenty-four owners and different level managers of pork production operations from a range of sizes and types (farrow to finish operations, contract finishing operations, and farms combining pork enterprises with other agricultural enterprises) participated in the focus group meetings. The participants in the group discussions were mostly male, and the ratio of owners to hired managers was 3:1.

Twenty of the focus group participants filled out the questionnaire requesting demographic data and structural information about their operations. The number of employees on the pork operations varied from 1 to 110 employees, with an average of 28 employees per farm (n=16). Ages of participants ranged from 22 to 67 years old, with the average being 45 years of age. Focus group respondents were in their current position, on average, for 18 years; with the range for time spent in their current position between 3 months and 48 years. Seventy-five percent had taken at least some college courses, and 45% had graduated from college. Compared to a 2005 national survey of pork producers (Hurley et al.), focus group participants were 5 years younger and somewhat more educated.

Percentages and examples reported below do not include the contractor group, because most contractors viewed themselves more as hired workers than as managers. Typically, contractors did not hire labor beyond immediate family members and completed production tasks themselves, making HRM functions minor in comparison to production functions performed. However, the discussion of the contractor group informed the analysis in other ways, such as the dissatisfaction with bonus systems and the differing perceptions within the production chain, which persisted within integrated farms, as well as, between integrators and contractors.

HRM practices and labor or work attributes can be risk-neutral (not included in this analysis), risk-increasing, or risk-reducing. In some cases, a few managers may perceive a practice or an attribute as risk-reducing, whereas others may perceive the same practice or attribute as risk-increasing. For example, a rural location of the farm was perceived as challenging with respect to recruiting labor, because some managers thought potential employees or their families prefer to live near large cities. Other managers advertised “good fishing and hunting” as an amenity of working in a rural community, making one managers’ challenges

another managers' opportunities. For analysis purposes, managers' speech turns are coded according to their own perception. However, where the authors' point of view differed from the managers' point of view based on background knowledge of HRM research, it is discussed.

Table 1. HRM Practices and Attributes Increasing Risk or Reducing Risk on Pork Farms (Number of Speech Turns in Percent of Total HRM-related Speech Turns)

Performance Management: 22% (a) day-to-day informal interaction with employees, including informal feedback; (b) work-related communication; (c) prioritizing of tasks; (d) dealing with problems	
Risk-increasing: 8%	Risk-reducing: 14%
(a) "do as I say, not as I do" management, cultural views, expectations towards "bosses"; (b) lack of top-down communication; (c) lack of priorities; (d) employees lacking attitude to try to do well, inability to instill a sense of "ownership" in employees, employees' "baggage" interferes with their work	(a) patience in dealing with employees, honesty and fairness, separation of work and friendship, providing individual feedback; (b) regular meetings with employees, sharing information on production data with employees; (c) goal setting; (d) employees' ability to problem solve, peer pressure for performance, assessing employees' willingness to change

Compensation: 14% (a) wages, benefits, perquisites, and bonuses; (b) employees' understanding of the compensation system and its parts, including employees' understanding of the rules to receive bonuses and the value of benefits; (c) forms of pay and scheduling	
Risk-increasing: 4%	Risk-reducing: 10%
(a) lack of knowledge of competitive compensation level, inability to provide competitive compensation, salary or wage ceiling; (b) unclear or misleading bonus rules, lack of benefits, de-motivating aspects of compensation system, benefit costs are not explained to employees; (c) disagreement on salary versus hourly pay	(a) competitive wages and benefits, non-traditional benefits and perquisites; (b) clear explanation of benefits, clearly defined, goal-oriented bonuses; (c) regular time off or time off on demand

Recruitment: 11% (a) accessibility of a willing and able workforce; (b) techniques to increase the applicant pool, e.g., word of mouth, vocational education teachers, high schools, and colleges, advertisements	
Risk-increasing: 5%	Risk-reducing: 7%
(a) entry level hiring limits access to qualified applicants, location-related challenges (e.g., remote location may deter people, less remote locations experience more competition); (b) lack of definition of skills and experiences being sought, relying on walk-in applications	(a) using social capital to recruit, hiring good applicants even when fully staffed, hiring managers from within; (b) defined job description, working with services to increase applicant pool (e.g., for hiring foreign employees), utilizing trade magazines to advertise

Training: 11% (a) orientation; (b) training and its evaluation; (c) development opportunities for employees	
Risk-increasing: 4%	Risk-reducing: 7%
(a) no process in place, send employee "into the fire" with minimal direction; (b) not preparing for training, not able to reach different learning styles (tendency to label employee as "untrainable"), not evaluating training abilities of trainers used, lack of safety training; (c) one-time training then expect employee to be self-reliant	(a) attention to initial experience; (b) patience in training, hands-on training, building on employees strengths, multiple ways to teach employee, testing to evaluate trainees' learning, carefully selecting trainers for skill level and ability/willingness to teach, safety emphasis in training; (c) provision of manual or reference materials for employee to refer to

Working Conditions and Organizational Structure: 11% (a) physical conditions of the work; (b) organizational conditions of the work, including hierarchical structure, but excluding teams, which are part of the social environment	
Risk-increasing: 5%	Risk-reducing: 5%
(a) dirt, dust, smell, and noise; physically demanding work; health and safety concerns; (b) farm hours, including weekend and holiday work; many tasks a repetitive; flat hierarchies provide few promotion opportunities	(a) outdoor work opportunities; (b) sufficient employees or slight overstaffing to allow manageable workloads and prevent stress or crisis, matching employees and suitable jobs, rotation to provide flexibility in assignments or to reduce burnout, allow flexibility for completion of some tasks

Selection: 8% (a) using techniques to choose among a pool of applicants, (b) based on reproducible criteria	
Risk-increasing: 2%	Risk-reducing: 5%
(a) no selection process, e.g., because of pressure to hire; (b) not preparing for interview (no criteria or prepared questions), not "picking up" and acting upon relevant information provided by the applicant, selecting employees who are incompatible with the existing team or the surrounding community	(a) taking applications rather than on-the-spot hires, checking work history, checking references, thoroughly interviewing job applicants, hiring part-time to screen for full-time positions; (b) preparing for interview by considering questions, selecting compatible employees

Hiring Immigrant Employees: 7% (a) hiring newly immigrated or temporary foreign employees; (b) hiring employees for whom English is a second (or third) language and who lack English fluency	
Risk-increasing: 3%	Risk-reducing: 4%
(a) cultural idiosyncrasies (e.g., alcohol consumption, behavioral expectations), lack of compatibility with the community, conflict with U.S. employees; (b) lack of communication	(a) willing and able workforce, accepting of working conditions, respectful of employer, able to provide referrals to other potential employees; (b) hiring bilingual employees, translators

Discipline: 6% (a) policy and process (formal and informal) to encourage sensible behavior at work; (b) punish or correct an employee if a rule or procedure has been violated	
Risk-increasing: 2%	Risk-reducing: 4%
(a) relying solely on peer pressure; (b) not having or using a formal process, discipline process with HR manager inaccessible to middle managers, responsibility for discipline not with direct supervisors, need for discipline not communicated to senior management or not acted upon by senior management	(a) coaching employees before entering into a formal discipline process; (b) using a formal multi-step process, documenting steps in discipline process in writing, employee understands consequences of actions

Performance evaluation: 5% communicating employees' (a) strengths and improvement needs, (b) in an explicit manner; (c) having a process for two-way communication	
Risk-increasing: 1%	Risk-reducing: 3%
(a) "employees know how they are doing"; (b) lack of explicit communication (e.g., superior performance only communicated through a pay raise), ambiguous, unspecific communication regarding performance	(a) focus on the positive, but clearly communicate improvement needs; (b) formal and regular employee evaluations; (c) allow employee to evaluate business and/or manager

Social Environment: 5% (a) employees' relationships with coworkers and management personnel; (b) meetings between employees and management beyond work necessities (e.g., social gatherings, picnics, holiday celebrations); (c) counseling employees	
Risk-increasing: 2%	Risk-reducing: 3%
(a) disrespect by coworkers or management personnel (e.g., for immigrant employees), prolonged conflicts, in particular interpersonal conflicts, affecting working ability	(a) flexibility in team assignments, acknowledgement of milestones in employees personal lives (e.g., birth of children); (b) arranging for and investing in gatherings with employees; (c) providing counseling to employees in need, or providing reference to where help can be received

Labor Law: 1% (a) knowledge of labor laws and regulations, precautions to ensure compliance with labor laws; (b) misgivings about specific regulations; (c) worries about potential lawsuits	
Risk-increasing: 1%	Risk-reducing: 0.1%
(a) overwhelmed by changes in laws or lack of access to current information; (b) critique of existing regulations (e.g., child labor protection) or how they are enforced (e.g., immigration); (c) possibility of specific incidents leading to lawsuits (e.g., wrongful discharge, sexual harassment)	(a) efforts to keep current in labor law knowledge, working with specialists (e.g., attorneys) to avoid problems, actively documenting employee coaching, discipline, and reasons for termination, documentation/paperwork for all immigrant employees kept current

The order of HRM practices and labor or work attributes in Table 1 mirrors the rank of each category based on the focus group discussions. Ranks were calculated from the percentage of speech turns, breaking down long speech turns addressing different aspects of a category or different examples into smaller units. As explained in the method section, the initial categories (Bitsch and Harsh; Bitsch et al.) were restructured and refined, as results emerged. Also, an additional category, performance management, was added to better reflect managers' way of thinking about HRM. The order of reporting on the categories follows the framework suggested in Bitsch et al. as closely as possible to allow the reader to easily compare and contrast the results of these different analyses. Due to space constraints, only a few examples are discussed in the text; additional examples are included in Table 1.

Performance Management

The day-to-day performance management was the category on top of participating managers' minds when asked about HRM and focused upon in the management of employees. The informal interaction with employees to assign tasks, keep work processes flowing, and overcome problems is the key task to the functioning of any operation (see also Bitsch and Yakura on agricultural middle management; Bitsch and Olynk on skills sets required of managers in livestock production). Manager may call this aspect of their work "motivation" or "communication" and describe many different activities involved in accomplishing production. The skills and tasks associated with performance management ranged across showing employees that the job was important and exciting, portraying a positive attitude, regularly sharing information with employees, and involvement with goal setting.

The failure to use adequate practices to manage performance was increasing risks of turnover or low productivity, as did some attributes of the workforce, in particular, if a manager

failed to address these problems. A common concern was lack of top-down communication, when workers or even management level employees were not made aware of what is expected of them or did not receive all the information they needed to successfully complete their tasks. Another common concern was that many employees come with "baggage" which may interfere with their performance or lead to quitting. Examples of such situations were alcoholism or drug abuse, as well as, a personal history involving children or previous spouses at different locations that were owed financial support. Managers worried particularly about being forced to garnish an employee's wages, effectively turning them into a "bill collector."

Managers used different practices to reduce HRM risks in their day-to-day operation, including regular meetings with employees to address multiple topics, such as productivity and safety measures. Some managers invited their veterinarian to provide detailed productivity data to employees and developed performance goals based on that information. Most participants depended on teams or individual co-workers to exert pressure on lower performing employees to improve their work quantity or quality. This strategy of allowing or encouraging peer pressure was employed both in a motivational, as well as, in a disciplinary manner.

Recruitment and Selection

Attracting and then selecting and hiring new employees to farm operations were both important HRM functions to focus group participants. Recruiting ranked third and selection ranked sixth in emphasis during the pork focus groups, respectively. Recruitment techniques cited by participants ranged from the widespread use of word of mouth and referrals from current employees, to advertisements placed in newspapers and recruitment through colleges and universities. Screening and selection practices ranged from hiring on-the-spot, through the use of applications as a stand-alone procedure, to sophisticated, multi-stage interviews, or

employment on a part-time basis prior to a formal, fulltime job offer.

Many producers cited a lack of potential employees with farm experience or with interest in working in production agriculture as a problem. They saw a farm background, including having lived in a rural community, as being desirable. Several managers described job candidates who had never been on a commercial animal agriculture operation, and whose first exposure was a tour during the interview process or on their first day of employment. They also cited the need for potential employees to want to live in rural surroundings, which was particularly the case in Kansas. A risk-increasing practice that was mentioned rather often was to rely solely on walk-in applications. While these managers might voice concern about the lack of interest in agricultural work, they were not undertaking any active efforts to offset this issue.

On the other hand, the use of the social capital of managers and employees to recruit through networks typically reduced HRM risks. In addition, some Kansas farmers used services to hire foreign employees through guestworker programs. Another risk-reducing practice that several managers mentioned was to hire "good applicants," even when fully staffed. This practice, often cited in a recruiting context, was also discussed in a working conditions context, because it led to more flexibility for the manager and less stress for co-workers. It also helped to alleviate pressure to hire in a crisis, which helped avoid other risk-increasing practices, such as hiring walk-ins without time to review applications or interview applicants.

A risk-increasing selection practice was to forgo a selection process, most often because of pressure to hire. Similar in results was short-changing the selection process by only taking partial information into account, even when more information was available, or not defining criteria for selection. Although some criteria that managers reported using would not stand up to legal scrutiny or to generally accepted HRM knowledge, having criteria in place is more likely to

result in successful hires. In addition, unsuitable criteria can easily be replaced with more promising criteria, if a selection process was used.

Aside from using a screening process at all, some managers used multiple selection practices to reduce HRM risks, such as checking an applicant's work history or references, taking applications, thoroughly interviewing job candidates, and preparing for the interview with criteria and questions. Selection criteria, which many participants cited as risk-reducing, included evaluating employees' compatibility with the current team and surrounding community.

Training and Development

The training and development category included different practices from an orientation period at the beginning of employment, through concrete training procedures, training evaluation, and further development for both general labor and management personnel. Practices ranged from depending solely on a new employee's initiative to learn required procedures and master tasks to well thought-through procedures, including evaluation and testing of trainees' learning and comparing different trainers' success in teaching. Varying techniques were used for testing trainees' skill levels, ranging from having the newly trained employee scheduled to work along-side a manager, to written exams, and to formally structured reviews where an employee is asked to perform certain tasks in a timed situation to demonstrate mastery of skills.

Likely the practice involving the most risk was to send a new employee "into the fire" with minimal direction. In a similar vein, several managers did not have a training process in place, but taught whatever seemed appropriate when the new employee got started on assigned tasks. Although very flexible, this practice bore multiple risks, because there was no safeguard that a specific required job duty would be taught. Because this type of training may result in a new employee being assigned a limited set of tasks, it also contributes to disappointment and

lack of motivation. Another risk-increasing practice was neglecting safety training or not putting emphasis on safety during the training process. In addition, a few managers showed a tendency to view some employees as not trainable without much effort in trying to teach those employees.

From participants' point of view, one of the most important characteristics of a trainer is patience. Providing hands-on training and multiple ways to present the training content increase the likelihood of trainees acquiring the necessary job knowledge and skills. In addition, the availability of written material which the new employee can rely upon as a reference to be consulted in the future decreases training risks. Another risk-reducing practice was the careful selection of trainers depending on their skill level and/or willingness to train new employees.

Performance Evaluation

Performance evaluation of individual employees through meeting with them to discuss their strengths and weaknesses and any need for improvement, was a rarely used HRM practice among focus group participants. Indeed, as a group, managers did not have much to say about performance evaluation practices.

From a HRM point of view, managers depending on implicit understanding, e.g., one manager remarked, "[…] employees know how they are doing," was a risk-increasing practice. Likewise, communication of superior performance solely through a pay raise, forgoes the advantages of formal and documented evaluations. Many managers considered a combination of pay raise and day-to-day informal feedback as sufficient and did not provide any formal evaluation. Some managers saw this as suboptimal and were looking for ways to improve their HRM system. A risk-increasing practice among those who did provide formal evaluations was not to include the employee's direct supervisor. An employee evaluated by senior management with minimal supervisor input may not receive sufficiently specific feedback.

Of the few participants who conducted formal and regular employee evaluations, several pointed to the necessity to focus on the positive, while still clearly communicating improvement needs. Another risk-reducing practice, mentioned by some participants, was to invite the employee to evaluate either the business or the manager in the process.

Discipline and Termination

Few participants reported to have a defined policy or process in place to correct employees who violated a rule or procedure. However, a defined process, formal or informal, for employee discipline was cited more often than a performance evaluation process. Also, managers of larger farms and, in particular middle managers, seemed to perceive the need to institute a more formalized and accessible discipline process.

In managers' own assessment, except for some very small farms, as well as, from a HRM point of view, not having or not using a formal discipline process was a risk-increasing practice. Yet, having a process in place that was perceived as inaccessible by middle managers does not lead to better results. Middle managers recognized that the direct supervisor should be responsible for discipline, although this was not the common practice.

A risk-reducing practice with respect to discipline was coaching employees before entering into a formal discipline process. Some form of coaching was used by most participants, as well as, peer pressure by co-workers, which was categorized as a performance management practice, because although it may lead to voluntary turnover, it did not result in dismissals. HRM risks were reduced by using a formal multi-step process for employee discipline, including documenting the steps involved in writing. Managers pointed out that throughout the discipline process the employee needed to understand the consequences of his or her actions.

Working Conditions and Organizational Structure of the Farm

In pork production, HRM risks were increased through several attributes of the agricultural workplace, such as "farm hours," which in most cases included weekends and holidays, repetitive tasks, and a flat management hierarchy with few opportunities for promotion. Undesirable workplace characteristics mentioned included dirt, dust, smell, and noise. Some focus group participants also cited resulting safety and health concerns as risk-increasing.

One important way to reduce turnover risk was the matching of employees and suitable jobs or tasks on a farm. That meant that employees did not necessarily perform the tasks they were hired to do, which was in part caused by not using targeted selection criteria in the first place. In these cases, employees were allowed or even encouraged to find the type of work they enjoyed doing and/or were good at doing, i.e., finding the place within the operation where they were a good fit. As one manager pointed out this often worked in the desired direction, "A lot of times people kind of gravitate to where you need a person. They can see there's opportunity there. There's a place in the operation where you need a key individual, and they can see that opening and they'll kind of go for that and we've had real good luck that way."

Other risk-reducing practices in pork production were rotation schemes to provide flexibility in work assignments or reduce burnout and slight overstaffing to ensure a sufficient number of employees, manageable workloads, and to prevent crisis. Risk reduction through a rotation scheme was perceived to result from multiple avenues, including reduction of monotony on a specific task or job assignment, changing the environment from indoors to outdoors (e.g., doing fieldwork in the spring and summer months), as well as, changing co-workers.

Social Environment

Focus group participants thought the social environment was important to employees. The

discussion of the social environment at the workplace centered on matching employees to their managers and teams, flexibility in team assignments, and informal meetings with employees.

Increased risk resulted from employees not getting along with co-workers who might leave although valuable to the farm operation. Peer pressure was a concern as a team member who is alienated by co-workers would be likely to leave. Co-workers being disrespectful of an employee increased this risk. Such concerns were often mentioned in relation to immigrant employees who were looked down upon by "traditional" American employees in work teams.

Some participants used rotation to allow employees who did not work well together a break from each other, stating that a way to make employees leave was to assign them to work daily with someone they did not get along with. A more common practice to deal with incompatibility of employees was flexible team assignments whenever possible. Another risk-reducing practice was gatherings for employees with or without their families, such as a farm picnic or a holiday dinner. Middle managers, in particular, discussed pizza lunches and similar events on special occasions as important in motivating employees. Managers highlighted getting teams from different areas together that might not otherwise interact, as well as, giving employees time to visit with managers informally. Participants pointed to support and counseling of employees in personal matters, such as purchasing a house or family related issues as another aspect of the social environment. Counseling ranged from listening to an employee venting frustrations about a situation at home to managers helping the employee to find professional support.

Compensation and Incentives

Compensation and incentives was the second most frequently discussed category during the pork producer focus groups. A wide range of practices were discussed from whether workers should

be paid hourly or on a salary, to bonus systems, and the challenges faced by managers in the communication of the compensation system and the provision of benefits.

Risk-increasing practices included lack of communication of compensation systems or systems in which employees did not understand the rules to achieve wage increases or bonuses. De-motivational aspects of bonuses were commonly discussed, such as when a bonus designed to motivate the nursery to keep more pigs alive caused the growers problems when pigs in poor health became a liability to other departments. Lack of benefits was commonly cited as a risk-increasing practice, ranging from providing no benefits at all, to employees seeking additional benefits, such as dental insurance. Wage ceilings were also a concern, as many participants stated that they wanted to compensate a long-term employee who did a good job a living wage although they felt they could not afford that for certain positions.

Risk-reducing practices included paying competitive wages and benefits and basing the pay range on skills. Such pay schedules served to increase motivation as employees benefit directly from increased training. Another risk-reducing practice was well defined bonuses where employees understood how to achieve bonuses, thereby increasing productivity or driving a team towards a common goal. Explicit communication on the cost of benefits and making sure employees understood all benefits they received was considered risk-reducing. Several focus group participants appeared disappointed by employees requesting a retirement program when one was already in place or expressing limited understanding of the benefits they were receiving.

Participants also discussed the value of perquisites in compensation. Middle managers reported being motivated and increased loyalty by receiving such unexpected extras in the past; senior managers also noted their value in compensating deserving employees. Perquisites included traditional food for holidays and gift certificates for special trips, which employees

would be unable to afford. A particularly unusual item was the gifting of a house, in which an employee lived, after 20 years of employment on the farm.

Hiring Immigrant Employees

Hiring immigrant employees was often-times a topic of controversy, and one in which participants expressed varying degrees of experience and anxiety. Several farms hired newly immigrated or temporary foreign employees. The language and cultural differences were cited as a major challenge. Language barriers occurred when hiring immigrant employees who lacked English fluency and the ability to clearly communicate. Several methods for overcoming the language barrier were highlighted by participants, including translation of operating procedures to aid employees in their daily tasks, hiring a translator to attend meetings and facilitate open communication, having a bilingual employee act as a translator, and paying for English classes to be taught on the farm.

While language is the most obvious challenge when hiring immigrant employees, the cultural backgrounds and expectations of immigrant employees were also discussed. For example, in the Hispanic culture a manager may be expected to attend certain birthday parties of children, holiday meals, or other celebrations in the employees' family; lack of attendance may be considered an insult. A manager unfamiliar with these values had a hard time motivating and keeping those employees. Conflicts between "traditional" American employees and immigrant employees were often highlighted as a main concern or challenge. Some participants suggested that while two teams, one consisting of immigrant employees and one consisting of American employees, could work on the same farm, the teams themselves could not be mixed. Others had had success with teaming immigrant and American employees, and experienced greater success with communication when teams were mixed purposefully to include a bilingual employee.

Participants cited immigrant employees as a willing and able workforce for production agriculture, and commented on the high level of commitment to the job and strong work ethic in their immigrant workforce. Another risk-reducing aspect of hiring immigrants was their acceptance of the working conditions, in particular, monotony. Other risk-reducing attributes highlighted by participants included respectfulness of managers and employers, and the ability to provide referrals of other similar employees.

Labor Law

Labor laws were perceived as changing and confusing by many participants. Large organizations in other industries employ HRM departments to deal with such matters. However, on many agricultural operations most HRM tasks are handled by managers.

Not being able to prevent specific incidents which may lead to lawsuits was identified as a risk-increasing attribute. Several participants mentioned wrongful discharge or sexual harassment claims as examples. In some cases participants discussed precautions that they were taking in order to avoid such problems. Participants were also critical of specific legislation (e.g., immigration or child labor protection) as being impractical and requiring updates.

Practices which were identified as risk-reducing included the use of outside specialists (e.g., consultation with a lawyer regarding wrongful discharge concerns). Employing outside help in hiring foreign employees was another example. As one manager pointed out, "[…] all the paperwork and it's kind of like you wouldn't doctor yourself, and wouldn't try to be your own attorney." Further, risk-reduction regarding labor law can be accomplished through knowledge about laws and regulations throughout the management team. Some senior managers, in particular, cited that they would like their middle managers to have a solid understanding of labor law in order to prevent problems. One manager explained that all

discussions which could potentially be problematic were done in the presence of the human resource manager to prevent future problems.

Conclusions

The focus group discussions allowed insights into participants' perceptions of their HRM practices. Practices of pork production managers did not appear to be notably different from managers in the dairy industry (Bitsch et al.) or practices of horticultural managers (Bitsch and Harsh). Therefore, this study was able to build on and refine a framework for analyzing HRM risks developed in those previous studies. Common practices and attributes of HRM in pork production were identified as risk-increasing or risk-reducing (Table 1). The authors' determination of HRM practices and the managers' judgment matched in most, but not all cases.

An interesting observation was a tendency to see problems as externally caused and solutions outside the control of farmers themselves. Statements such as "[…] the school system is failing ag in our area, by not having kids more interested in pursuing something in production agriculture […]" exemplified this sentiment. Entities mentioned in this context included high schools and colleges who did not create more interest and cooperative extension by not providing training programs for potential employees. On the other hand, some managers gave presentations at local schools, invited students to internships, or worked with vocational education teachers to ameliorate the situation. Another example of external attribution of control was labeling employees as not having the right attitude or not being trainable, without much indication of an effort to motivate or train these employees. Problems of several of the participating managers with respect to developing and implementing an effective incentive system were another example. These managers framed this as a system problem, stating that bonuses do not work well per se or have undesired effects, rather than considering how the

system was designed and communicated to employees.

A number of focus group participants expressed the viewpoint that some people have a "knack" for managing employees and others do not. However, at the same time, many focus group participants expressed a general interest in attending skill-improving workshops and presentations, as well as sending other managers from their operations to participate. The majority of participants, including those who indicated that "you are either a people person or you are not," contributed various topics on which they would like to attend a seminar or workshop. The desire to attend workshops and acquire information and knowledge on managing employees indicated that managers felt the skills necessary for successful people management are learnable (and teachable) to at least some degree.

Participants of the pork producer focus groups were asked specifically about what HRM skills they would find useful to have covered in a workshop. Topics of interest to participants included effective communication, motivation, recruitment techniques, dealing with undesirable working conditions, retaining good employees, and conflict resolution. The aforementioned skills were also highlighted in a special report by the *National Hog Farmer* based on a survey of producers asking them to identify their greatest weaknesses in personnel management (Hurley et al.). Other areas of weakness included in the survey were few training or growth opportunities, weak benefit packages, lack of well-developed work plans, excessive work hours, weak salary level, getting employees to share ideas, and not screening employees well enough.

Educational workshops have been developed for managers and owners of pork farms based on the analysis of the focus group discussions. Topics covered in the workshops included selection, training, employee evaluation, compensation, conflict management, discipline and termination, communication, and motivation. Each section of the workshop was followed by a

discussion of which aspects of the training participants were planning to implement and how to approach HRM changes. This provided participants with additional opportunities to gather ideas from each other. Workshop participants cited multiple items which they felt were important for HRM management, including the importance of communication and praising of employees, not taking employees for granted, politeness, and maintaining a positive work environment. Phone interviews several weeks after the completion of the workshops indicated that participants were planning the use of newly learned practices, including interviewing techniques and utilization of middle managers in formal employee evaluations. While most interviewees thought the planned HRM changes would increase productivity, as well as reduce costs in some cases, few were able to quantify the monetary value of those changes with reasonable certainty.

Further investigation of HRM in production agriculture should seek more in-depth analysis of the skill sets needed for managers to succeed in HRM, in particular in the arena of day-to-day management, which has been rarely researched. Case studies and in-depths interviews could yield more precise information on the multitude of HRM practices discussed. Research questions should center on the areas which focus group participants put most emphasis on. Specific interview questions based on focus group participants' perceptions would have the advantage of more closely matching the interviewees' lifeworlds, and therefore be more likely to be interpreted in a common manner and subsequently yield more valid answers. Investigation into the HRM attributes and practices across geographical areas could yield additional insights into the practices used and attributes common to specific regions. Geographic concentration and recent location changes of specific livestock industries could be used as an indication of promising research.

In addition, broader representative studies, including additional agricultural sectors, could

answer the question whether HRM practices are similar or different in varying subsectors and which factors account for differences. Further investigation into poultry or beef production may yield more variation in HRM practices and the skill sets or training necessary to successfully manage human resources. However, it will be difficult to develop and implement large scale survey research in this field, because of the amount of detail respondents would be required to recall, the time commitment required of already overburdened managers, and the lack of personal interaction between researchers and respondents, which may hamper reliability.

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