

Assessing Needs for Labor and the Current Workforce

How much labor of what type is needed and when? How much is needed during various seasons? Does the current staffing pattern and allocation of personnel make sense? A labor estimate worksheet (see example on pages 47-48) that lays out tasks by month throughout the year can be used to organize data in the process of answering such questions.

By describing types and timing of production work to be done, the first two sections of the worksheet lay a base for estimating the number of “fulltime-equivalent” people needed to perform operational tasks. The third section summarizes these operational, as well as managerial, requirements, and it begins consideration of how to distribute all this work—or how it is presently distributed—across specific jobs and/or people. The fourth section carries on to help determine the content of each employee’s (current or prospective) job.

Existing business records and knowledge about the skills, past performance, and aspirations of current farm staff, including the owner’s family members in the business, are useful in completing the worksheet. With the resulting workforce inventory at hand, diagnostic questions can be addressed. For example:

- Are people in jobs that fit their abilities and preferences?
- Does performance meet expectations or a local industry norm, e.g., cows milked per hour in a parlor of given size and technology?
- Do all jobs really contribute to the operation or have any been created to accommodate personal needs of a family member?
- Could some of the work be done better, cheaper, or with less trouble through contract with an outside service provider?

Taking careful stock of business labor requirements, the current workforce, and your own skills should yield a good sense, if not a precise assessment, of the match between organizational needs and current staffing. A look at the outlined labor requirements and at the abilities and skills of current employees might find one of the following:

1. A good match. Current employees together have the skills and desire to do all the jobs required to operate now and in the foreseeable future.
2. An improvable match. An appropriate number of good employees are on board, but some changes in the tasks or whole jobs they do would make the whole system work better.
3. Overstaffed or a mismatch. There are too many employees or some who are poorly qualified for the work to be done.
4. Understaffed. Not enough people are employed for the work that needs to be done.

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Obviously, if the match is good, there is no need for adjustment. The second situation above suggests a need to review employees' skills and interests and either reassign them or modify jobs to achieve a better match of farm needs and their talents. The third situation raises questions of whether an employee could be retrained, expansion is in the cards, or the dismissal of an employee is necessary. The last one normally triggers a hiring process (see Chapter 3).



Assessing Managerial Capacity

Self-analysis isn't easy, but it is incumbent on every manager and is a part of an employer's assessment of management resources in the farm business. Instruments are available to assist in examining one's own abilities and dispositions relevant to managerial work. Several are available at AgHelpWanted.org.

To embark on a less structured, lower-tech introspection, consider some questions like those below. It may be helpful to discuss them with a spouse or other trusted partner.

- What are your personal strengths and weaknesses?
- What supervisory experience and skills do you have?
- Can you teach and listen effectively?
- What are your attitudes toward family members and hired employees?
- Do you expect different things from people of different cultural backgrounds or genders or with personal interests outside the ranch that you do not share?
- Can you trust others (and who?) to control work and resources of great importance to you?
- How do you react to others' mistakes, complaints, and recommendations?
- What things about you do current employees respect or like?