

The best use of references is to verify “hard,” objective information first provided as written biographical data (i.e., application or resume) or in the interview. It is useful to know whether statements made or written by the applicant are true; most former employers do not hesitate to disclose the title, responsibilities, and period of employment, plus sometimes the former employee’s reason for leaving.

As in other communications, it is a good idea to listen for the tone as much as the words during a reference check. Is the person enthusiastic in speaking of the employee or is there guarded caution? What did the reference *not* say. “She gave me no problems,” means something different than “She did her job well.” It may take some clairvoyance to decode the real message of such comments as “You’ll be very lucky to get him to work for you,” and “I can recommend her with no qualifications whatsoever.”

If the reference check is by telephone, stating your identity, your purpose, and your appreciation makes for a good start:

Hello. My name is {name}, and I operate {or work for} the {business name}. {Applicant name} has applied for a position as a {job title} in my business. He/she has told me that you know about his/her work. Would you give me a few minutes to discuss his/her employment at your place, and is this a convenient time? Thanks very much.



Making and Communicating the Decision

With all the planning and information gathering involved, employee selection can be quite a project. In most cases it deserves to be, but how extensive any given process should be and how many sources of information to use depend on the job and business circumstances. A decision about a ranch supervisor deserves more investment than a summer helper. No matter what level of job to be filled, however, it is wise practice to avoid relying entirely on information from a single source (e.g., an interview or personal reference).

After whatever combination of paper screening, testing, interviewing, and reference checking is used, decision time arrives. If some considerations about an applicant have not been built into the assessment process, they can be factored in at this point. For example:

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- How might this person contribute to or detract from our operation in ways outside the scope of the job that we are filling now?
- How well will the applicant harmonize with coworkers?
- What has the person shown us that we were not even looking for?

If in the course of recruitment and selection, an applicant is discovered who does not closely meet the requirements of the position but stands head and shoulders above the competition in other respects valuable to the business, an option to ponder is to redefine the job and adjust those around it. Consultation with supervisors and other farm staff, normally a requisite part of selection decision making, is particularly crucial before going this way.



A tomato grower learned firsthand the value of using multiple sources within a systematic overall selection process. After losing three tractor drivers consecutively in a four-month period, he asked the local extension educator for help. The two discussed the job for an hour, wrote a brief description of it, and sent the description along with a “help wanted” note to local schools, community centers, and the state employment office. Farmer and educator chose six of the 14 applicants, based on tractor driver experience claimed in written applications, for further consideration.

All six were interviewed and tested in the field on a single day. One individual was extremely impressive in the interview. Both farmer and educator were tempted to offer him the job on the spot, but they held fast until test results were available. The ranch manager who administered the performance test, a short series of in-field maneuvers on a wheel tractor later reported that this apparent star had no touch at all for the fine cultivation work required. Nearly eight rows of tomatoes had been taken out in this valuable learning experience.

Recognizing that the best talker is not always the best driver, and that this job mainly required driving, the grower hired another applicant, who had come off well in the interview and exceptionally in the work sample. That driver remained a productive, satisfied employee on the ranch for a long time.

The following steps simply recap key points about the selection process:

1. A careful selection decision is a major investment.
2. Systematic selection begins with specifying attributes that would equip a person to perform the given job successfully.
3. Information about applicants is collected in sequential steps, depending on nature of the position, time constraints, company policies, and size of the applicant pool.

4. Four major information sources are written forms, tests, interviews, and references — best used in combination and with care.
5. The employer is a buyer in the labor market. Merely forking over the purchase price by no means guarantees satisfaction.

Pertinent to the labor market as much as any other is the old economist's adage, "*Caveat emptor*. Let the buyer beware." And let the buyer also remember that while systematic selection improves the odds of buying good performance, it cannot remove all risk.

Offering the Job

An offer can be made by phone or in person. A reasonable opening is to state that several qualified candidates were considered and extend an offer first to this applicant at a specific rate of pay. If there are lingering questions about the job description, company expectations, and conditions of employment, this is the time to clear them, so questions should be invited. Expressing expectations that the candidate will do a good job and enjoy working in the business contributes to starting the relationship on a positive note. If the applicant wants time to think about the offer before making a commitment one way or another, a time to reconnect can be set.

Once a selected applicant accepts the verbal offer, putting its terms into a letter or other written document confirms the deal and helps avoid misunderstandings. Even if not applicable to a given hire, the first five elements of mandatory written disclosure under the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act make for a checklist of essentials to include in a written offer:

1. Place of employment
2. Wage rate
3. Crops and work activities
4. Period of employment
5. Transportation, housing, and benefits provided and their costs, if any
6. Existence of any arrangement under which the employer or contractor will receive commissions or benefits from sales to the workers
7. Existence of any strike or labor dispute at the place of employment

Disclosure of all seven items is required for all migrant and seasonal day-haul workers when they are recruited. It is required for other seasonal agricultural workers only if they request it.

Notifying Other Applicants

Letting people know that a job they had applied for has gone to someone else is an act of good business, as well as a personal courtesy. While in certain circumstances, notice by phone call works better, doing it by letter is usually easier and has the additional virtue of allowing for careful construction of the message.

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