

Orienting New Employees

The recruitment and selection processes are the beginnings of worker orientation. Through the procedural steps applicants undergo on the way to getting hired, they acquire information and form impressions that affect their decisions about how to perform on the job, beyond whether to accept an employment offer in the first place. Unfortunately, not many farm business managers take full advantage of either pre-hire or the less time-constrained post-hire opportunities to orient employees.

How does the new milker, picker, or mechanic feel when arriving to work the first day? He or she probably has a strong desire to succeed and is anxious about fitting into the new environment, as both a productive worker and part of a social group. If the employer provides for both, the new employee becomes more certain that it was the right decision to accept the job offer, and everybody wins. During the initial days on a job, employees are probably as receptive as they will ever be to signals about what is expected and offered in their new work environment. This period is a critical time that shapes new hires' impressions and understanding about how to get along.

The work environment experienced and the performance pattern an employee establishes during the first few days will have a strong influence on that person's attitude, productivity, and team spirit for weeks, months, and even years to come. This holds true even for seasonal workers, as many return to the same employer year after year.

There is much for the employer to get across about administrative matters in addition to job tasks, tools, and functional relationships. A well-planned orientation accelerates the new hire's development and shortens the time to reach the productivity level desired. At best a weak one wastes opportunity and at worst, it figuratively throws cold water in the face of a worker who was excited to be starting a new job in a new place. At harvest time, when many agricultural managers are particularly busy and face a sudden influx of employees, a well-planned employee orientation can do much to help make transitions as painless as possible and get new employees off on the right foot.

Orientation to farm jobs traditionally has been handled in casual style, often by crew supervisors who merely introduce a new hire to crew members and the flow of work. Workers entering farm businesses through kinship and friendship networks arrive somewhat oriented to their jobs and working conditions. For these newcomers especially, continuing orientation and integration into the workforce tend to center on social and familial relationships.

New employees often are reluctant to ask many questions for fear they will appear ignorant. By anticipating what they will want to know and providing it



“There were a heckuva lot of things they didn’t tell me when I hired on with this outfit.”

through experiences and documents, growers can reduce more uncertainties than are expressed. An orientation handout (in the language workers use most) serves as a continuing reference that will help employees recall what they may not have been interested in or able to digest when initially told.

What does a complete orientation cover? The process involves the new hire in filling out personnel forms, learning about job duties from a supervisor and coworkers, reviewing the company handbook if there is one, taking a tour of the new surroundings, meeting coworkers, and starting work activity. In designing an orientation process that fits a given operation, it is wise to get opinions from those who have recently joined the firm.

Suggested elements of an orientation for new employers are listed below:

Initial welcome

- Introduction to department manager
- Clarification of the name the employee prefers to be known as
- Brief history of the company
- Lunch with a coworker the first few days (arranged in advance)

General information and procedures

- Reference document stating terms of employment, including nature of the contract (such as fixed-term or at-will) and other company information
- Location of restrooms, personal storage areas, bulletin board, emergency supplies, and phones
- Policy on personal use of telephones, company equipment, and facilities
- Disciplinary, suggestion, and complaint procedures
- Special policies or procedures that are unique to working with a given unit or supervisor

Work time and pay

- Work days and hours and variability of the schedule
- Lunch and break periods
- Overtime requirements or options
- Means of notification in case of changes
- Call-in procedure when unable to show up when expected
- Tardiness and absenteeism policies
- Time card or other time-keeping procedures
- Paycheck distribution — when, where, how
- What to do and whom to ask about any pay discrepancies
- Starting pay rate, including incentive wages or bonuses, and any normal progression
- Relation of future pay increases to merit, longevity in job, or cost of living
- Fringe benefits available

- Procedures for use of vacation credit, sick/personal leave, and holidays
- Performance review and appraisal procedures

The job

- Tour of the specific area(s) in which the employee will work
- Introduction to the lead person and others in the work unit
- Organizational structure and chain of command beyond the work unit
- Systems, tools, and procedures in the entire work unit
- Job duties and scope
- Relation of the employee's job to the end product and consumers
- Specific performance expectations and work standards
- Product quality requirements
- Any promotional opportunities and anticipated time to achieve them

Safety

- All elements of the company injury and illness prevention program
- Pesticide safety training as required under the Worker Protection Standard
- Use and care of work equipment
- Identification and location of workplace hazards
- Use, storage, and disposal of solvents and hazardous chemicals
- Use of personal protective equipment (PPE), including clothes, footwear, respiratory, and eye protection
- Symptoms of pesticide illness and heat stress
- Lifting techniques and avoidance of ergonomic hazards
- Use of fire extinguishers and emergency procedures in case of fire
- Location of first-aid/medical care
- How to report and deal with accidents and illnesses

An effective orientation pays off in employee performance, retention, and workforce harmony. In this example, a manager recalled what a new orientation effort did for his firm:

Years back, we had a new employee orientation program we called Operation Indoctrination (OPDOC). We had OPDOC welcome letters for new employees, OPDOC welcome packages, OPDOC name tags for the new hires, and a buddy in their department that we called an OPDOCER. We also had top and mid-level managers stop by to introduce themselves to any new hires and to welcome them the first week. The program didn't just belong to the personnel guy. The whole company was part of it, and we all had a lot of fun with it. . . . oh, and we reduced turnover by 64 percent.



