

# How to Hire Good People for Your Farm Operation

BY: ALISON RICE FOR AGWEB.COM | SEPTEMBER 8, 2016



Spend just a little time talking with dairy farmers, and you'll quickly learn about one of their key pain points: finding and keeping good workers.

"We do have a lot of challenges in New York that's keeping farms from expanding," Tonya Van Slyke of the North East Dairy Producers Association told AgDay this summer. "The first one is really labor."

It's a challenge that extends to both hiring and retention. "It's just difficult to find that person who wants to put in a long day, get dirty, and come back the next day. The folks we have tried to hire typically will stay six or nine months and then they will go on," added Sarah Noble-Moag of Pavilion, N.Y.

If this situation sounds all too familiar, Mike Knapp has some ideas for you.

"Most employers are pretty bad at identifying the skills they need," says Knapp, CEO and co-founder of SkillSmart in Germantown, Md., who urges ag employers to focus not on applicants' specific job title history, but the skills they used in those jobs and whether or not those are a good fit for your operation.

He also encourages ag employers—farmers, ranchers, ag retailers—to think longer term about each new hire and how they might contribute to the future of your operation and even the industry overall. "You can't just make sure you have the right person today," says Knapp, particularly if you hope to grow your farm operation. "There is a big gap between the smaller family farms where a few people do everything to the large operations where things are more specialized."

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For smaller farm operations, that's an advantage worth highlighting with applicants. Rather than pitching a position as just a job, tell potential hires what skills they will learn and how those might fit into their future ag career, Knapp advises. "This can really help smaller farmers get the entry-level workers they need and also build the pipeline for the industry," he says.

Afraid of investing all these extra effort only to have these more promising workers leave too? That's understandable, but Knapp reminds farmers to stay committed to hiring quality workers and helping them develop their skills, rather than simply filling the slot with someone who is good enough for now. "The reality is you're seeing the same turnover (regardless of who you hire), and you're not getting the good people," he warns.