

WHY SMALL AND MID-SIZE FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL OPERATIONS NEED IMPROVED EMPLOYEE RECRUITMENT FOR POST-COVID-19 SUCCESS

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A shift in mindset and a few new strategies can help leaders overcome hurdles in recruiting to attract and secure the best possible talent.

The lean nature of smaller to mid-size food processors and farmer- or partner-owned operations such as cooperatives and family-owned businesses might make them very effective business models, but the traditional nature and cultural worldview of these organizations can sometimes get in the way of hiring much-needed new talent. For instance, farmers and ranchers don't tend to pay themselves much week over week, preferring instead to put as much profit as possible back into the business. They generally need a few key managers to operate efficiently, however, and these managers usually require salaries higher than what the farmers pay themselves.

While those sitting on agricultural cooperative or partner-owned business boards likely understand the need and



importance of bringing in new hires — as well as the economics of the payback the co-op will receive by paying new hires market wages — tension can exist with the general membership regarding new hires' salaries, particularly when it comes to hiring managers with higher salary requirements. Needless to say, the tension poses some recruitment challenges for many food and ag operations.

The need to recruit people to support growth, promote strategic innovations, and respond to normal attrition is still very real, however — and perhaps the need is even greater given the effects of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), as businesses have needed to innovate and adapt. At the same time, the pandemic has created even more recruitment challenges. It's time for agricultural leaders to face these challenges and allocate some focus on recruitment practices. A few strategic shifts can help them bring in better talent and help their companies thrive now and into the future.

THE PANDEMIC IS COMPLICATING EMPLOYEE RECRUITMENT EVEN FURTHER

Because agricultural businesses are considered essential infrastructure, the expectation during COVID-19 has largely been “business as usual,” only with added logistical challenges brought about by the pandemic. The difficulties surrounding and social distancing have certainly hurt communication, teamwork, workflow and so on for many co-ops.

Conflicting priorities are creating distractions for leaders today, and it's easy to focus more on the “urgent” rather than the “strategic.” Since the pandemic hit, many leaders have focused on putting out fires as they happen rather than preventing them for the long term. They're spending time responding to the virus and all its related impact in the workforce, handling risk mitigation, and keeping up with all the new regulations. What's more, as stress is high, the possibilities for interpersonal challenges abound, and frustrations and shorter fuses are commonplace.

The impact of the pandemic on employee recruitment for small agricultural operations is significant. Consider those with heavy sales in the foodservice industry. With restaurant revenue falling, these companies have been cutting costs and tightening their belts, which often results in hiring freezes. Those serving food retail, on the other hand, have experienced some of their highest sales as consumers began stocking pantries at the beginning of the pandemic. These organizations may need more staff, but the economic situation coupled with an uncertain economic future has still made it difficult to commit to new hires. Besides, people with jobs have been somewhat reluctant to leave for new opportunities. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, as they say.

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HOW AGRICULTURAL OPERATIONS CAN BRING IN TOP TALENT IN THE FACE OF RECRUITING CHALLENGES

The labor market has been tight for years, and as everyone becomes accustomed to the new normal, employers are hiring, and pent-up demand for employees is making the market even tighter. If a small to mid-size food and agricultural organization wants to find new talent, then, a passive approach won't cut it.

To attract top talent, it's increasingly important for an organization to cast a vision of its long-term stability. Any business that has weathered the COVID-19 storm so far has become much stronger and has demonstrated its stability and ability to survive, if not thrive, and greater job security can be an attractive quality for even the passive job seeker. Capitalizing on this in recruitment strategies can make a significant difference in attracting talent.

This particular employee recruitment strategy isn't a cure-all, however. Many high-performing employees are focused on making their current organizations successful in this business climate more than on their own career advancement — a fact that can help reluctant members buy into the recruitment strategy in the first place. But, this also means workers are simply not perusing the want ads with any regularity. If food and agricultural organizations want to attract talent, they must get in front of candidates with impressive and attractive opportunities — not rely on candidates to line up with résumés in hand.

One relatively simple way to get in front of top talent is LinkedIn. Networks and groups make it easy to find candidates who look promising, and direct messaging allows employers to reach out to passive job seekers with new and enticing opportunities. Again, simply posting a job and waiting for résumés to trickle in won't work in this landscape. Instead, outreach on LinkedIn can enable a more proactive employee recruitment strategy.

Recruitment challenges may persist, but it's important for smaller agricultural operations to consider them now if they want to stay innovative and successful well into the future. Otherwise, the best candidates will be gone from the ever-shrinking talent pool. Fortunately, a shift in mindset and a few new strategies can help leaders overcome hurdles in recruiting to attract and secure the best possible talent.

