

Building a Reputation as an Employer

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With unemployment rates reaching historic lows in many parts of the country, employers of all kinds are struggling to fill positions—regardless of the business’s size, type, and location. There are businesses, however, that never seem to struggle with finding qualified applicants. Their reputations are so strong that people will jump at the chance to work there. They are the employers of choice. They set an example and offer a lesson: If you want to find better employees the solution is simple, be a better employer.

Feedlots, dairies, farms, manufacturing companies, and retail businesses all compete within the same labor pool. Unfortunately, a potential employee might not think about job opportunities that exist within the agricultural businesses. Go into a community and ask the first three people you see which businesses are the best places to work. Those businesses are the employers of choice. It should be every employer’s goal to be on that list.

To become the employer of choice, managers must address many challenges. Of course, this is usually easier said than done. Budget and time constraints can form a barricade between a business and its goals. That does not have to be the case. According to Dr. Bernard Erven of Ohio State University, there are several basic things an employer can do to improve employee morale and business reputation: like, enjoy and appreciate employees; use written job descriptions; provide training; show trust; catch people doing things right; develop pride; and celebrate successes.

Also, you should strive to understand your employees’ needs. Most businesses cannot afford to pay exorbitant wages—something they assume employees want. Parents of young children might benefit more from childcare. Some people may value time off more than extra cash. Not all employees want, or need, health insurance—they may already receive it from a spouse’s employer. Flexibility is something a small employer has. Use it to your business’s advantage.

Work toward having satisfied employees. Research shows that employee satisfaction is a function of four core dimensions. **Variety** ensures that employees use a variety of skills and

abilities in performing their daily tasks. **Autonomy** indicates the amount of ownership an employee feels he or she has over his or her work. **Task Identity** refers to the ability of an employee to see the importance of his or her position in the entire business scheme. **Feedback** relates to the amount and quality of communication about the employee's and the business's performance. Taking steps to improve these four dimensions can do more for an employer's reputation than the most elaborate compensation package.

By far the best recruitment method used by businesses today is word of mouth. Your employees are the best ambassadors your business can possibly have. If they speak highly of your business and their experience there, you are likely to 1) have less turnover and, therefore, less need to recruit new employees and 2) have more people within the community wanting to work for you—even if it means leaving another, less desirable, employer.

Once you have developed a great working environment, word should spread throughout the community. There are some things that you can do, however, to help it along: sponsor an open house for local school children; participate in the local school's career fair; sponsor events at the county fair; give your employees caps and jackets which display the business's logo. Most importantly, develop a good relationship with the local media. Newspapers and radio stations are constantly looking for human-interest stories—give them something to talk about.

No matter how tight a labor market is, there will always be businesses where people want to work. By developing a good human resource management philosophy and communicating those successes with the general population, you will soon become the employer of choice for your community.

To learn more about this and other human resource management topics, plan to attend the Employee Management for Production Agriculture Conference on August 2 & 3, 2001. Call 316-431-1530 or visit www.oznet.ksu.edu/employee for details.