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Farm employee management: Assembly of farm job descriptions

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Why have job descriptions on the farm? They provide multiple benefits to your operation. Good job descriptions aid in recruitment, interviews, selection and hiring of better employees. Once those employees are on your farm, employee training and development are enhanced because you know what needs to be done. This results in increased employee satisfaction and productivity. Accurate job descriptions aid in evaluating employee performance and determining where additional training is needed. Improved communication among employees occurs when they understand their duties as well as their role in the farm operation. Finally, when you take the time to assemble and maintain updated farm job descriptions, your organization benefits from the analysis of labor requirements

and identification of what needs to be done and by whom.

The actual assembly and writing of job descriptions on your farm is not difficult, especially if you approach the task in a step-by-step manner.

Conducting a job analysis

Identify the key positions already in existence on your farm. Be sure to include every position in the job analysis process – including the positions and tasks performed by the owners and managers at your dairy farm.

Then for each position, conduct a job analysis. A job analysis is simply the process of breaking down and understanding the various elements of a position. First, explain to your employees that you are conducting a job analysis for the purpose of writing job descriptions, and that

you expect all employees to benefit from this process. Give each

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Handbook updates
 For those of you subscribing to the handbook, the following new updates are included.

Change in Corn Prices by Two Week Period – A2-17 (1 page)

Change in Soybean Prices by Two Week Period – A2-18 (1 page)

Please add these files to your handbook and remove the out-of-date material.

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employee a form that asks three basic questions:

- 1) What do you do on your job? List every task that you perform from the most minor and simple to the most major and complex. List as many tasks as possible.
- 2) For each task you listed, state how often you perform that task such as daily, weekly, monthly, several times a year?
- 3) For each task you listed, list the items of equipment or tools that you use to perform that task.

After each employee has completed this written exercise, take time to sit down with the individual worker and go over it. You will likely find that they omitted some tasks. Inquire about what training was important to learn how to do these tasks and what additional training would be beneficial. Ask the employee, "If you were hiring someone to do your job, what qualifications or prior training would you want that employee to have?"

The job analysis process focuses on what work is currently being accomplished. However, it is helpful to think about what tasks may be going undone – but should be completed on a regular basis in your operation. This process identifies additional labor needs on the farm.

Examine the job analysis results

Once the job analysis process is completed, scrutinize these results for what you can learn. Sit back and think about whether the positions as currently configured make sense. Are there responsibilities and tasks that should be reassigned? Are the time and talents of some employees being wasted on menial tasks that could be assigned to newer, less-experienced employees? Is there one or more position that should be restructured or new positions to be created? Charting or diagramming the positions and work-flow on your farm may help you to see a better way to get things done.

Elements of the job description

Armed with the results of your job analysis process, you are ready to start writing job descriptions. The purpose is to paint a word picture of each job so that everyone in the organization understands what is expected of that position. Most job descriptions will include six basic elements:

1. **Job title.** Make sure the job title accurately describes the job being performed. Obviously, the types of jobs on your farm will depend on the nature of your operation, i.e., whether the farm is strictly a row crop operation or if you have a beef or dairy cattle operation, swine, poultry or other livestock. Some operations need mechanics, computer technicians, bookkeepers/accountants or general maintenance workers. Remember, a typical agricultural production operation has different needs from what you might have seen 30 years ago.
2. **Job summary.** Immediately after the title, give a concise definition or description of the major job responsibilities. This type of short description may be used for recruitment purposes.
3. **Job qualifications.** List the knowledge, education, experience or training necessary to perform the job. Include realistic physical requirements essential to perform the job such as an ability to stand for long hours at a time or lift and carry a certain weight. Do not make statements that are discriminatory on grounds of race, gender, age, or national origin.
4. **Job duties or tasks.** List all the job activities that the worker performs in that position. Start with the most frequently performed duties and proceed to the least frequent duties. The degree to which the position is specialized will impact the number of job tasks on the list. It may be helpful to include an approximate percentage of the time that duty is performed. At the end of the list, it is common to include "other duties as assigned by supervisor" to allow for flexibility.

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- 5. **Work relationships.** In this section, describe who supervises the position and whether the position includes any supervisory duties. Describe how this position relates to other positions in the organization.
- 6. **Time of Work description.** This section is not intended to be a specific work schedule, but rather a description of the range of hours worked each week and whether the position includes night and weekend work.

Other information about the job such as compensation plans, benefit plans, housing, etc., are

generally not included in a job description. This would normally be included in a separate document for that specific purpose.

Once you have completed job descriptions for each position on your farm, you will find them to be invaluable tools in improving your organization. As you use job descriptions in employee recruitment, development and evaluation, the process of keeping them updated will become easier.

As always, feel free to contact me with any of your farm employee management questions.

Price and yield (and revenue) risks: Is insurance up to the task of handling them all?

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Over the last several decades, most discussions of farm programs for crop farmers have included the concept of risk management as a means of distinguishing newer programs such as crop and revenue insurance from more traditional programs such as nonrecourse loans and supply management. As Congressional activity heats up for the 2012 Farm Bill, risk management is the central justification for most of the commodity title program proposals.

Crop farmers face two major kinds of risks that need to be managed: price and yield. Either one separately or both together affect the revenue that a farmer receives to cover her expenses and hopefully provide a profit. There is nothing in any farm program that can or should substitute for good financial and agronomic management. Risk, on the other hand, is what happens over and above the level of financial and agronomic management and is, to some greater or lesser extent, beyond the control of the farmer.

While price and yield together determine crop revenue, it is important to look at them separately

because they have different characteristics.

The general price level of a major crop is beyond the control of a given farmer. Yes, good financial management may yield a farmer a quarter a bushel more than his neighbor, but when corn prices are at the \$2.00 level it is highly unlikely that a farmer is going to receive \$6.00 a bushel. Similarly when prices are at the \$6.00 a bushel level, even the poorest marketer is likely to receive at least \$5.00, a number well above the cost of production.

Price is what is called a systemic risk. It affects all farmers across the country without regard to their agronomic and management ability. There is little an individual farmer can do to affect the supply and demand interaction that results in a low price. Farmers are price takers not price makers.

Insurance is unsuited to take on price risk because price risk is systemic. There are two consequences of this systemic risk. First, when farmers take out insurance to protect them at a given price and the price falls below that level, it does so for all farmers. That is akin—for property insurance