

Finding the Right Apprentice

How to sort through candidates, interview, and choose the best Apprentice for your operation



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Whether you've had full time employees on your farm or not, it's worthwhile to take your time finding the right Apprentice. You will be investing more time and energy in training your Apprentice and they need to have the passion and aptitude for the job. It's a unique relationship.

Before you look at applicants, consider taking the following steps:

1) Job Analysis: The job analysis involves developing a list of duties, responsibilities and skills. The Job Book details these skills. The job he or she will be learning is your job. The job analysis determines how the Apprentice will be trained, which tasks are basic ones that will come during the first year, and how you will transition the Apprentice into tasks with greater responsibility over time so that he or she gains management level skills.

2) Job Specifications: Job specifications include basic knowledge, abilities, and experience that you are looking for in your Apprentice. Although this is intended to be a training program, some Masters may want to hire an Apprentice with some experience on a dairy farm, or at least experience with farm equipment. Other specifications might include a driver's license and ability to lift 50 pounds or more, etc. Many Masters also look for evidence of passion for the work and interest in taking an active part in the learning process.

3) Job Description: Develop a basic job description using the information you compiled in the Job Analysis and Job Specifications. This can be a simple one-page outline with a job summary, key duties, supervisory relationships and working conditions. It becomes an outline for interviewing candidates you are considering (see sample job description).

4) Determine a pay range. The minimum requirement for a DGA Apprentice is \$8/hour with a \$0.50 increase every 6 months. These rates and increases are set by the US Department of Labor, however many DGA Masters set starting pay at higher levels to ensure high quality candidates. Whatever rate you set, you are required to give a 6.25% increase every six months. In-kind pay may be included in the total. In-kind pay can include housing, farm-produced foods such as meat, milk or vegetables, or heifer calves that can help the Apprentice begin to build equity while they are learning.

Checklist of possible Apprentice job specifications	
<i>Consider the basic skills you need your Apprentice to have the first day they arrive on the farm. What skills are you willing to train them on? What skills would you like them to be able to do already?</i>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Equipment operation experience (tractor, skidsteer, other?)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Experience operating trucks, pulling trailers
<input type="checkbox"/>	Prior dairy experience
<input type="checkbox"/>	Prior experience with livestock
<input type="checkbox"/>	Prior experience in any sort of farming situation
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ability to lift 50 pounds or more
<input type="checkbox"/>	Stamina: ability to work long hours and/or long weeks
<input type="checkbox"/>	Good communication skills
<input type="checkbox"/>	Aptitude/passion for learning
<input type="checkbox"/>	Passion for becoming a farmer
<input type="checkbox"/>	Brings complementary skills that farm currently doesn't have
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other:
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other:
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other:

Evaluation steps

Before reviewing applicants:

1. Identify minimum requirements and desired skills based on your job analysis, description and specifications (see Sample Dairy Farmer Job Description).
2. Prioritize requirements from most important to least important.
3. Consider developing a standardized ranking worksheet to compare candidates (see Apprentice Candidate Ranking Scoresheet).
4. Decide on your process. We recommend the following:
 - a. Request and check references
 - b. Consider requesting a resume (not all candidates will have one, but this is another way of evaluating how they present themselves and how they communicate).
 - c. Plan initial interview (do them by phone? In person?), develop a set of questions (see Job Interview tip sheet)
 - d. Have the final one or two candidates come and work with you on your farm for a weekend or a week so you can 'try each other out'.

Recruiting candidates

In addition to Apprentice candidates who have applied on the DGA website, you are welcome to consider bringing on family members, existing employees, local people who you know. You can even advertise in standard media such as Craig's List or local newspapers.

Reviewing candidates

1. Review potential candidates initially for background and experiences that catch your eye. Start your pile of eligible candidates with these.
2. Sort potential candidates into those meeting minimum requirements and those who don't. The DGA website has many candidates listed, but many may not meet your minimum needs.
3. Rank those meeting minimum requirements based on your prioritized requirements. What are the most important skills you want your Apprentice to have at the outset? What are you willing to teach them?
4. Also consider this remaining pool base on other traits you want to see in your team members, such as dependability, positive attitude, eagerness to learn, etc.
5. Identify the top two to four candidates to interview.

Setting up interviews

1. Even if you have a single top candidate, it's a good idea to interview two or three. Qualities that don't come across on paper may come to light in a face-to-face interview and may move a candidate to the top of your list.
2. Develop a set of interview questions (see Job Interview tip sheet) that you use for each candidate. A consistent set of questions will help you compare candidates.
3. Plan to start your interview by giving the candidate an overview of your farm and how you manage. Consider giving them a tour of the farm as part of the interview.
4. Have a quiet, private place to conduct the interview.
5. Create a tone of open discussion. Make sure the candidate has ample opportunities to ask questions of you. The interview should be a two-way discussion intended to determine whether you're a good fit for each other.

Making the decision

1. Consider inviting one or two of your best candidates to work with you for a weekend or more (separately, not together).
2. Evaluate your selection based on their skill-set and their passion and excitement about being part of the program and working with you on your farm.
3. Make the offer
 - a. Finalize agreement on pay rate, work hours, etc.
 - b. Finalize agreement on in-kind compensation (especially housing, if available).
 - c. Consider using a written employment agreement (see template).
 - d. Set start date.
 - e. Inform DGA by sending a hire message through the website AND letting your Education Coordinator know.
 - f. Have initial meeting with Education Coordinator and Apprentice to fill out paperwork and set goals for the Apprenticeship.