

# Hiring Top-notch Farm Labor Means Digging Deep

*Recruiting, hiring and keeping the best farm workers requires careful planning.*

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Successful businesses depend on good employees, and finding good employees can be a tough task for farmers looking to maintain or expand their businesses. That was the message that Bernie Erven, Ohio State University professor emeritus, shared during the Growing Michigan Agriculture Conference Jan. 24 at the Lansing Center.

“Employee relations is one key to the growth of Michigan agriculture,” said Dale Rozeboom, Michigan State University Extension specialist and one of the conference organizers. “We invited Dr. Erven because we know that farmers often struggle when trying to hire and keep the best possible talent.”

Erven kicked off the conference by challenging attendees to think of a business that was thriving while its people were failing. He wasn’t surprised when none of the 75 people in attendance could come up with an example.

“No one single thing is more important than the people you hire,” he said, adding that far too many farmers try to keep everything in the family, even when it’s not in their best interest. “In agriculture, the hardest thing many people have to do is decide which family members to invite into the business.”

He suggested that business leaders develop a job description before making assumptions about family members’ fit in the organization.

“Before you even think about whom to hire, do a job analysis. Outline the job qualifications and put together a job description,” he said. “Too often the rule is ‘Anybody who needs a job in this family gets hired,’ but businesses that succeed hire only if they have a need in the business and the person fits.”

Next, he said, it’s important to build a pool of applicants. That means taking a long, hard look at how you spread the word about open positions.

“Talk to existing employees and find out why they like working for you,” he said. “If you want to hire seniors, for example, find out what they want and focus on that in your communication.”

As a final step, Erven said that interviewing is key to hiring success, even when hiring family members.

“Who else gets a job without an interview?” he asked the crowd. “An interview with family members can uncover a lot of information, both good and bad.”

With outside candidates, he said that being a good interviewer is critical.

“There is no worse place to lose outstanding applicants than in a poor interview,” he pointed out. “It’s up to you to come across as a person they want to work for.”

Erven was one of six professionals chosen by Michigan State University

Extension to discuss important concepts necessary to keep Michigan agriculture on a growth curve. You can see his suggestions for being a great interviewer, as well as other presentations by experts

from across the country, on the Michigan State University Extension website, [www.msue.msu.edu](http://www.msue.msu.edu). Click on “Agriculture” and look for “Growing Michigan Agriculture Proceedings” in the Resource

channel in the lower right section of the site.



**Editor’s Note:** This article was provided by the Michigan State University Extension.