

Interview Insight

Finding and hiring productive ranch employees begins with asking the right questions.

Story by
KINDRA GORDON

Imagine for a moment that you are a rancher looking to hire an individual to be your next herd manager. You've had several individuals apply, and have chosen three top candidates who may be suited to the job. How will you select the one who will make the best employee?

The answer should hinge on the interview — and the questions you ask. That's according to Bob Milligan and Bernie Erven, who have devoted their careers to human resource management efforts in the livestock industry. Milligan is an emeritus professor from Cornell University, while Erven is an Ohio State University emeritus professor. Today, both men work as consultants to the ag industry on human resource management issues.

"Interviewing potential applicants is a critical part of the hiring process in the effort to identify the best potential employee for the labor needs of the ranch," Milligan says. "The focus of interviews should be on determining the 'fit' of the candidate for the position and their interest in the ranch."

There's no denying that the interview process can be stressful — both for the candidate and for the interviewer. Thus, this duo advocates being prepared with a list of appropriate questions to gather the information needed to make your hiring decision.

Interview do's and don'ts

Milligan and Erven say a common interview mistake is asking nonspecific questions that encourage an applicant to say what he or she thinks the interviewer wants to hear rather than what the applicant is actually thinking.

Instead, the interviewer should focus on asking open-ended and behavioral questions that relate specifically to the knowledge and skills that will be required to do the job.

"Open-ended questions prompt the interviewee to share how or why," Erven explains. "Closed-ended questions set the interviewee up to only provide a yes or no answer, which does not provide much additional information."

For instance, instead of asking a closed-ended question such as, "Do you like working with ranchers?" make your request open-end: "Describe to us your experience working with ranchers."

Moreover, behavioral questions encourage applicants to explain experiences, characteristics and ideas in their own words. "The intent of behavioral questions is to discover how the applicant has handled real-world situations rather than what they promise to do in the future if hired," Erven says.

As an example, instead of asking: "What would you do if . . . ?"

Specifically ask: "Tell me about the steps you took the last time you helped a cow deliver a calf."

Most importantly, recognize that illegal questions should be avoided. Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) laws bar any business or organization from making human resource (HR) decisions on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, national origin, physical and mental handicaps (disabilities), pregnancy, age or veteran status.

"A guideline is to ask only about those things unquestionably related to the position and the applicant's ability to do the job," Milligan says. Thus, be careful not to off-handedly ask an illegal question such as "How are your kids?" or "What church do you attend?" when visiting with the applicant or while showing them the ranch.

Example questions

Following are several examples of different types of questions. Instead of asking a vague question or a closed-ended question that prompts a yes or no answer, consider the alternative ways of wording the question to get a more informative answer.

Instead of closed-ended: "Did you have any trouble with the ranch visit you had today?"

Specifically ask open-ended: "What are the three most important things you have learned about our ranch during your visit today?"

Instead of: "What would you do if you were going to be late for work?"

Specifically ask: "What did you do the last time you knew you were going to be late for work?"

Additional examples of behavioral questions:

- Describe what you did the last time a co-worker habitually did poor work. How did you help a co-worker who was habitually doing poor work?
- How did you resolve conflicts between co-workers when you were leading a crew?
- What did you do the last time

Checking references

The process of checking references can add to the information gathered about a potential employee beyond the application form and interview. Human resource management consultants Bob Milligan and Bernie Erven both advocate that this process of checking references is helpful and important — and is usually most beneficial after the interview with the candidate has been conducted. Here's why:

Foremost, it saves time. If the interview makes clear that a particular applicant is unacceptable for the position, then no time must be spent on checking his or her references, Erven points out.

He says checking references afterward also allows for more specific issues, strengths or weaknesses of the applicant to be discussed with the reference. Checking references after the interview avoids bias in the interview process as well. For instance, if a reference is so positive and enthusiastic about an applicant, the interview may be slanted to believing this

is the top candidate, without enough consideration for their skills and competencies.

Additional guidelines for the reference checking process include:

- Personal visits or telephone conversations tend to be more productive than asking for written comments.
- References from your personal acquaintances or from people well-known in your industry will be more productive than asking strangers.
- In this situation, ask specific, close-ended questions like:
 - ⊙ "Why would you or would you not rehire?"
 - ⊙ "Of all your previous employees, where would you rank this individual?" or
 - ⊙ "What is the most important contribution this employee made to your ranch in the last year?"
- Ask the same questions of all references.
- A reference's tone of voice may communicate more than the words being said.

- Be aware that some references have reason to give less than candid information, e.g., praising a problem employee in hopes that another employer will hire away the person. On the other hand, some employers may hint at problems in hopes of keeping an exceptional employee.
- Be aware that some employers have a policy of not providing comments on past employees. Do not penalize an applicant for having a former employer who will not give references. Instead, ask the applicant to provide references who have agreed to speak with a potential employer.
- Also, honor the request of an applicant who asks that his or her current employer not be contacted for a reference. Some employees fear their current employer knowing they are exploring other job opportunities. It is reasonable to ask an applicant the reasons for the request not to contact the current employer.

you were asked to do something you didn't know how to do?

- Describe a cow-related problem you have solved in the last year. How did you go about solving it?
- What has been your most important accomplishment in your current job?
- Describe your favorite co-worker.
- What is the most important ranch skill you have improved in the last three years?
- What is the most important new skill you are going to need to learn to get where you want to be in your career three years from now?
- What motivates you to put forth your best effort?
- What professional or trade groups do you belong to that you consider relevant to your ability to perform this job?
- What are the three most important things a cowboy needs to know about cows?
- Describe how you would handle a scours outbreak in the herd during calving.
- What is the most difficult work-related challenge you have ever faced? How did you handle it?
- Why should I hire you?

Sharing the ranch's vision

Lastly, Erven and Milligan point out that hiring and keeping long-term employees requires that employees also share and value the vision and mission of their employer. Thus, it is important to share with applicants during the interview what the ranch has determined its values, vision, mission and long-term goals to be — as well as how day-to-day tasks are done.

As an example, one ranch may have more of a buckaroo-style of doing things on horseback that includes roping and branding calves, whereas another ranch might use all ATVs and handle cattle through a chute system for processing. The use of technology, artificial insemination (AI), expected progeny differences (EPDs) and genetic markers, electronic identification (eID), etc., also contributes to ranch culture and should be shared up-front with applicants.

Being honest about how ranch work is done can also help applicants evaluate whether or not they fit with the ranch — some may embrace the use of technology, while others may prefer the traditional cowboy culture.

“Providing this information to applicants can be valuable in helping them determine up-front if they are interested in being part of the team that helps a ranch achieve its goals,” Erven says.



Editor's Note: Bob Milligan and Bernie Erven have collaborated on producing a step-by-step manual providing more insight into hiring, motivating and retaining productive ranch employees. Developed through the King Ranch Institute for Ranch Management under the guidance of Barry Dunn, the workbook is titled Human Resource Management on Modern Ranches and is available for a nominal fee by contacting Dunn at 361-593-5401 or e-mail krim@tamuk.edu to request a copy.

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