

Picking the Best Apple: Selection Tools for Recruitment

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In today's tight labour market picking the best prospective employee is one of the most important decisions for the success of your business. If we pick the best apple it can lead to

- less time in training
- more productive team environment
- less stress as an employer
- greater productivity.

If we pick the bad apple it can lead to

- reduced work efficiency
- discipline procedures
- good apples leave
- employment court procedures.

By implementing a robust recruitment and selection process we will have a greater chance of accurately selecting the good apple. There are selection tools that will increase the likelihood of greater success.

Currently New Zealand has very tight labour market with very low unemployment (4.3% March quarter 2004) and a severe shortage young people to enter the workforce. This does not mean that we have to pick the first apple from the tree. It actually means that the recruitment and selection process becomes even more important because you will want to identify the high quality prospective employees and retain them.

The recruitment and selection process can be broken into two phases: picking the kind of person you want and using selection tools to pick the best applicant.

Picking the kind of person you want

Searle (SIDE 2003) said that job analysis is the first step in the process because this starting point helps you clearly understand the role of the position you are creating or filling. It also can be used to clarify expectations of new and existing staff. The three steps before recruitment and selection should be: job analysis, job description and person specification. More information can be found in the Dexcel HR tool kit.

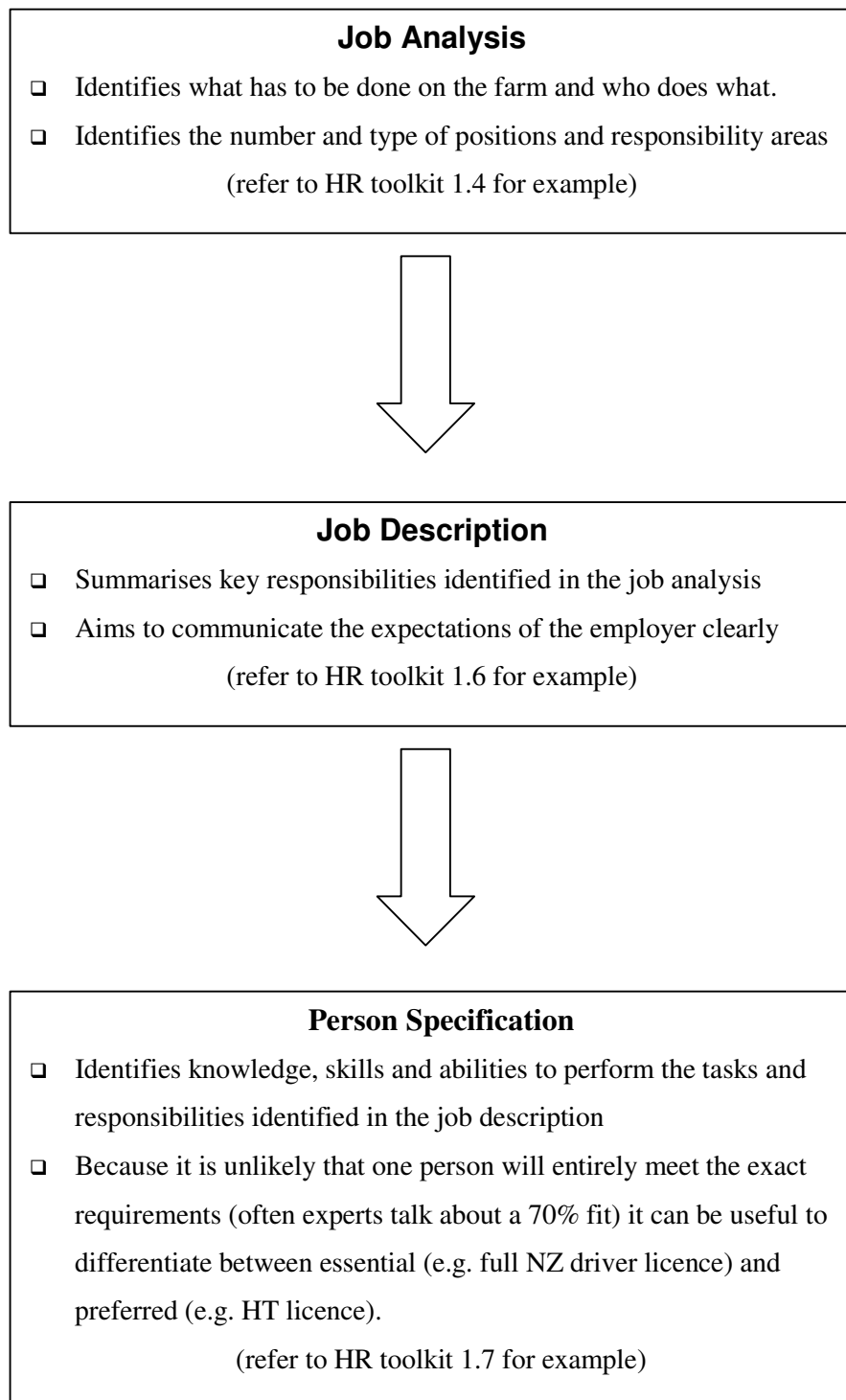


Figure 1 Recruitment and selection planning

Selection tools and processes

After the planning process and advertising you now have to select the person. Many farmers have remarked that this is one of the worst jobs they have to do, for the interview process can be very unstructured and the employer is often searching for questions that he/she can ask the prospective employee. As often happens in these ‘social’ situations, both parties will

latch onto areas of common interest (e.g. the weather, rugby, people they both know). This may mean that the interview is not clearly examining skills of the person to best fit the job you want to fill.

There are selection techniques that are used to help the process.

- structured interviews
- work samples
- reference checks
- curriculum vitae
- application forms
- personality tests
- intelligence quotient tests

You could use one or more of these for the selection process.

Structured interviews

Structured interviews allow you to ask the same questions in the same format to each applicant. The format is based on the key areas of the job, related to the job description and person specification. Using a structured interview (example in Dexcel HR toolkit 2.1.2) takes the pressure off the employer by allowing them to listen to the answers and knowing that all areas that need to be covered will be, compared with the sit around the table general chat.

Ideally, with an interview you want a panel of two or three, with each person having set questions to ask. This allows enough time for you to record answers and make notes in the interview. It also gives you time to really listen to the applicant's answers.

When interviewing, there will tend to be two types of questions you will ask: behavioural and situational.

Behavioural questions rely on the premise that past behaviour is the best predictor of future behaviour. Therefore questions are structured to provide an example from an applicant's past behaviour where they have demonstrated a particular skill, e.g. Describe how you have done a mastitis check on the farm you are currently working on, and how you have treated it? (Note that this is an open question meaning that a full answer has to be given, whereas a closed question would be "can you treat mastitis?")

Situational questions rely on the premise that future job performance can be predicted from the intentions and goals of the applicant. Questions are structured to give an applicant a theoretical situation and ask them how they would handle it, e.g. How would you handle the situation if you came across one of the senior staff members physically fighting with one of the junior staff members?

More examples can found in the Dexcel HR tool kit 2.1.19

Work samples

Work samples involve getting an applicant to do a task related to what they will be doing in the job. It is common in other industries as part of the selection process for applicants to perform a work sample. For example if someone is hiring an office administrator they may give applicants the task of formatting a report for a meeting and organising files on the computer. This is a way of testing their competency and also identifying areas for training if they are successful.

In more senior positions the work sample tests will become longer and more in-depth. An applicant for the position of manager running a hardware store might be asked to create a cashflow budget for the next year and do a SWOT analysis of the business.

The advantage of work samples is that they can be tailored to fit what is most important to you as an employer. In the dairy farming sector more farmers are getting prospective employees to undertake work samples. The two previous examples could be used for the positions of office administrator and farm manager on a dairy farm.

Examples of work samples can be wide and varied depending on what is important to the employer and how it relates to the job description. Here are a few examples of what farmers are doing:

Stockmanship

- help with general milking
- identify and treat animal health issues (e.g, lameness, mastitis)
- bring cows in from paddock

Numerical skills

- put up a fence a third of the distance along the paddock
- do a simple feed budget
- prepare a budget for the farm.

Team skills

- work with another team member on a general farm task.

Farm management skills

- condition score herd
- score pasture residuals
- help with fencing
- show areas in the farm dairy where problems can occur.

It is important to tell the prospective employee to bring appropriate clothing if they will be expected to do particular farm task work samples.

Reference checks

It is important to note that you must get permission from the prospective employee to contact their referees. References have been one of the main selection tools that farmers have used. They can be used to provide three types of information

1. evidence of training and education qualifications
2. past work experience and competence as described by an employer
3. character reference.

Reference checks should follow the same format as a structured interview with a pre-planned question format so that you ask all referees the same questions to ensure consistency and help rank prospective employees.

It should be noted that reference checks alone can lead to problems with staff selection. Things that go wrong are

- general unwillingness to be critical of someone to a stranger
- a wish to get rid of an undesirable employee
- a simple lack of knowledge of the person
- biased perceptions of the person (both good or bad).

Curriculum vitae (CV)

Often the first chance to select possible candidates is when scrutinising a CV. The concern with CVs is that it is often hard to determine the skill level and management responsibility of a candidate, e.g. In charge of 300 cows. Does this mean in charge of all animal husbandry and pasture management of 300 cows, or does it mean that the person was responsible for getting the herd in for milking?

The other limiting factor is that CVs have gained a degree of uniformity (e.g. Word® programmes have templates). A CV can indicate how stable or how ambitious applicants are by their work movements.

Application forms

An alternative to CVs is application forms. An application form is in a set format and the applicant fills it in. It can be used to ask specific questions such as health, criminal convictions, qualifications, last three positions etc. The benefit of application forms is that under “good faith” bargaining, both parties have to be totally honest with each other.

The benefit of application forms over CVs is that all information in forms is in the same order, making them easier to compare. Many HR consultants offer application forms. They are also available from Federated Farmers and HR toolkit 2.1.3.

Two further selection techniques that have been used are personality tests and intelligence quotient (IQ) tests. These are available from specialists. They need specialist skills to interpret the results. For almost all farm businesses they will not be a valid selection technique.

Personality tests

Personality tests are not really tests, but indicators of personality preference or trait. The main ones used in New Zealand are OPQ, 16-PF, Myer Briggs Type Indicator and DISC.

The concern with these tests is that they can be swayed by a person selecting the answers that they think the employer wants to hear and people may answer the questions in a socially desirable way. This leads to confusion in the interpretation of the results.

There has also been considerable evidence that personality is a very poor predictor of job performance, for personality testing does not tell you about the skills and knowledge that a person brings to the job.

The real value of personality testing is for people to learn more about themselves as a personal growth strategy and how this relates to communication with different types of personalities.

Intelligence quotient (IQ) testing (cognitive ability testing)

The idea behind IQ testing is that all jobs require some amount of intelligence. The more complex the task, the higher the demand for intelligence. Common measured mental abilities include

- general intelligence
- verbal reasoning
- numerical ability
- problem solving
- visualising spatial relations.

The two most common IQ tests in New Zealand are Wonderlic Personnel Test and Progressive Matrices.

The main issue with IQ testing is often the degree of fear they can cause in the person, e.g. If I score low this means that I am thick!. The other issue is that they do not deal with all the skills or attributes that are important for the job, e.g. Animal husbandry and how honest the person is.

Which selection tool should I use?

To use only one tool reduces the chance of selecting the best applicant. By using a range of selection tools you will have a greater chance of success. This may take extra time, but can you afford to pick the wrong person? The four main selection tools you should use are:

1. Application forms. A written record that gives an overview of the person and enables questions to be answered that may be uncomfortable to ask. Also, under 'good faith', the applicant has to be honest with the answers that they give.
2. Reference checks. In today's society, answers may not be as clear as they were in the past. Structure reference checks so that you are asking the same questions to each referee.
3. Work samples. With the hands-on nature of dairy farming there are countless opportunities to have people perform work samples as part of the selection process. The more senior the position the more complex the tasks can be.
4. Structured interview. A structured interview will reduce the stress of the employer doing the interview. By using both behavioural and situational questions you can clearly examine how well the person fits within the specifications of the job.

Last point

It is important to remember when selecting someone for the position, that they should have room to grow within the position. It has been said that a 70% fit for the job is sufficient.

One of the benefits of using the above selection tools is that not only do they identify strengths and skill levels of the applicant but also show areas of deficiency. This allows for training plans to be developed when they start the job and not six months later when mistakes have already been made.