

# Labor Management Decision-Making, Practices & Challenges

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# The Importance of Labor to Small and Mid-Sized Produce Farms



# Farm Labor a Top Concern

- Availability of labor is #6 of 32 organic farmer concerns (Organic Farm Research Foundation 2004)
- Labor is first issue confronted when expanding or scaling-up enterprises, #2 of 12 recommendations from a 2012 Vermont Local Food Study.
- Yet, many Extension or other tools either view labor as a plug-in or are designed for large enterprises.

# Research Overview

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1 focus group and 10 interviews with farm labor experts (farm consultants, produce growers, Extension planners, and workers).

90 in-depth interviews with *produce growers* from North Carolina, New Hampshire, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Vermont, and Wisconsin.

19 in-depth interview with farm workers in North Carolina, New Hampshire, Ohio, Vermont, and Wisconsin

Interviews explored labor issues including finding labor, hiring process, training, different worker categories, perceptions of the value of labor, farm goals, and values.

# The Limits of Direct Marketing and “Local”



The desire for foods of known qualities continues to grow, but local food systems are limited:

1. Limits of Direct Marketing – oversaturation and competition among CSAs and farmers’ markets in many areas.
2. Many farmers do not like to deal with the public.
3. Current farm scales limit production.
4. Decrease in mid-size farms.
5. Barriers exist to scaling-up.

#### **2019 *Locavore Index***

- Vermont #1
- Pennsylvania #11
- Wisconsin #14
- New Hampshire #16
- North Carolina #21
- Ohio #30

(Langeveld 2019)

# Emptying of Rural Communities

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Rural U.S. farming communities have been decimated from the “-ations”:

- Concentration and Consolidation
- Vertical and Horizontal Integration
- Specialization
- Mechanization



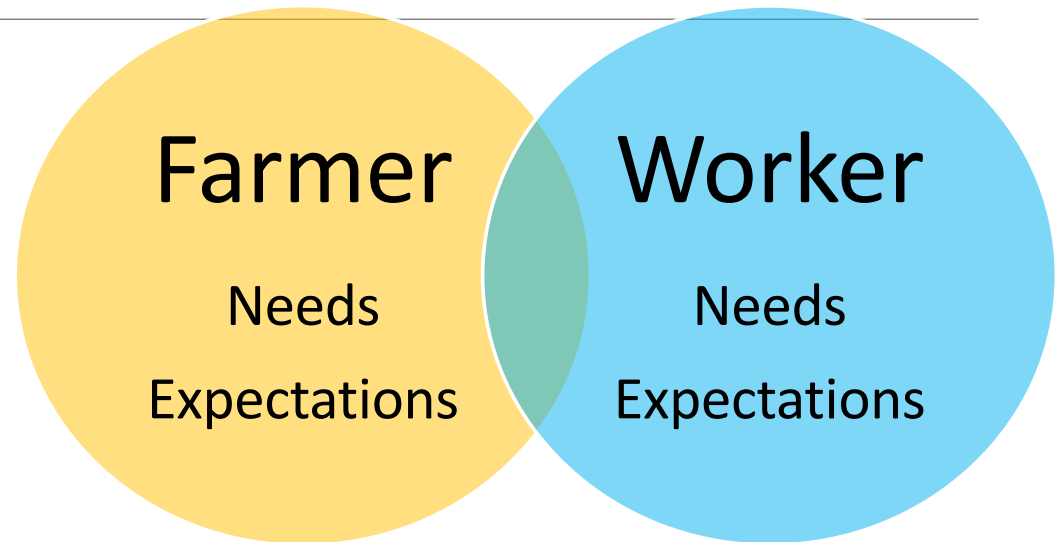
Photo credit: Bonnie Schlegel

Result: A bi-modal distribution of small and large farms, with older farmers operating concentrated, integrated, and specialized farm enterprises.

# Labor Issues are Two-Sided

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Farmer-Worker Dyad:

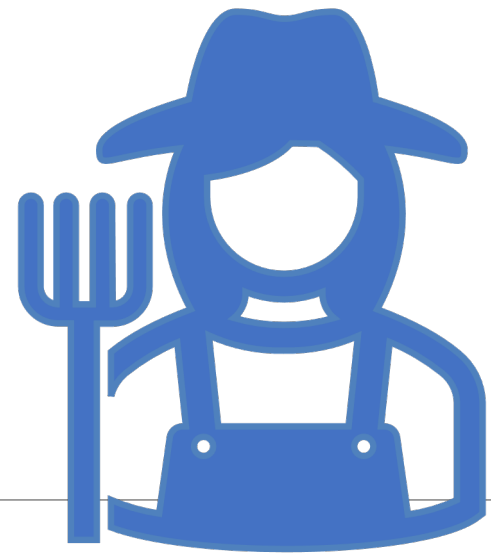


Though initially focused on farmer perspectives, the research quickly became two-sided.

Clear that there are many factors that need addressed in the unequal Farmer-Worker dyad.

# Farmer Perspectives

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# Farmer-Identified Issues in Labor



1. Farmer Values

2. Farm Goals and Household Needs

3. Identify Labor Needs

4. Identify Labor Community

5. Assess  
“Professionalism”  
and Management  
Style

# Farm Labor Check-Up

# Farm Labor Types

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Labor types - different personal and legal issues:

- Volunteers
- Interns
- Migratory worker employees (H2A)
- Part time employees
- Full time employees

Most farmers viewed labor types by:

1. Cost of wages
2. Work ethic, independence
3. Local availability
4. Interpersonal skills
5. Farm skillsets\*
6. Legal issues

\* Despite lay opinion, many farmers and workers agreed that farm work is skilled

# Grower Identity

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Produce growers shared blended Sustainable Ag Identity:

- Independent, their own boss
- Hard work and long hours
- Self-exploitation
- *Egalitarian*

These identities can conflict with having employees.

Employers who exploit their own labor are likely to overlook important issues in hiring and managing others.

The idea of managing workers conflicts with farmers identities.

Managing workers is perceived as a barrier to doing what they enjoy.

# Misalignment of Work Qualities and Expectations

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## Position Qualities

- Low wages
- Sporadic, part-time, seasonal job offerings
- Relatively low desire to train/invest in employees (high turnover concerns)
- Little HR management

## Expectations of Workers

- Skilled labor (unskilled labor is a misconception)
- Labor must be able to do everything
- Make good decisions and identify next steps
- Dedicated to the success of the farm

*The interns care if we swim or sink. I want people that have that fire in their belly, that passion for farming. It's not just another 9-5 job to them. VT Farmer*

# Management Style

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Many farmers reported wanting to be egalitarian and fair in their managing of employees:

- Seeking employee input in decisions
- Identify worker strengths and their fit on the farm
- Emphasizing cooperation and communication
- Avoiding a hierarchy of workers

*“I would say a question that we ask people is like “Does this seem fair?” I think fairness and equality in our practices is important to us.”*

OH Farmer

*“I really try to figure out people’s strengths early on and tailor their job description to really focus on their strengths. I’m really surgical about it.”*

VT Farmer



# Management Style

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*“My style has always been trying to show somebody what to do and then let them do it as though I wasn’t around.”*

WI Farmer

*“You have to have flexibility and role with the punches because not everybody is the same. Things happen in life. Sometimes life gets in the way of work and you have to make adjustments. You can tell people to get lost or you can say okay, if this isn’t working for you today, just take the rest of the day off and come back tomorrow, let me know.”*

OH Farmer



# Finding Good Workers is Difficult

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- Seasonal and part-time work
- Young workers graduating and moving on
- Mismatch of expectations and nature of the job
- Pay
- Location

*A big part of that was seasonal and people need full-time work. We can't offer full-time year-round work. It's hard to find people who are willing to work like that, and for the amount of money that you can pay them.*

OH Farmer

*I think our expectations have been too high. We set the bar so high for people that there's no way they could ever do it. But we are also super easy going and try to be super nice and then I think that they just realize that working out in the heat, doing this stuff...then the pay...*

WI Farmer



# Many Farmers Lack Applications and Job Descriptions

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- This is a problem for farmers with no management/HR experience.
- This is a problem for workers without farming knowledge.

*Some felt we could do a lot better at describing the job with an employee booklet (for) each task... how many radishes should be in a bunch? What do we tie it with? I think all of that is transitioning the business from having it in my head to other people be able to run it.”*

VT Farmer

*I do not have an application form. I ask them to send me some information about themselves; I do not have an official form. Pretty much I don't interview. Most of the time I don't have a choice.*

OH Farmer

# Training

The type of training employees received varied greatly.

*“I think that just saying what you want to be done doesn’t work. It really doesn’t work. People are always confused. You don’t know if people have other stuff in their brains going on that kind of clouds what you are trying to say. Just being there in the beginning to make sure they understand exactly what you want done is really helpful.”*

NH Farmer

# Investing in Training is not Always Worth the Cost

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*“We hired a lot of different people over the years and there were some people who were just un-instructable. They would stab themselves in the hand with a knife even though 10 minutes ago I showed them how to do it. They are un-trainable.”*

OH Farmer

*“So training is a challenge because it obviously takes resources and people come and they stay for a while and then they find something else and leave.”*

VT Farmer



*It's very hard to have employees in a produce business because I mean, what's a head of lettuce worth? How long did it take to grow it? How many hands touched it before it grew?*

OH Farmer

*"Some are easy to work with; some you have to manage more."*

NH Farmer

*"A lot of applicants come because they romanticize farming "Oh, I'd love to be a farmer one day" you know - those are the ones that don't actually make it."*

OH Farmer

*Many Employees are Challenging*

# Worker Perspectives

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Workers  
Understand  
Position  
Don't Just  
Emerge

Workers, discussed the types of duties and how they relate to job satisfaction.

Some farmers won't pay more for skills, will assign grunt work to employees.

- Farmers create positions with assigned tasks
- Farmers have control over the tasks they attach to a position
- Positions with a variety of tasks and changes throughout the workday were more attractive

# Recruitment

Farmers and workers described the same types of recruiting experiences,

- Word of mouth
- Formal advertising strategy
  - Craigslist
  - Comfood listserv
  - Good Food Jobs
  - And state organic and sustainable farming organizations like OEFFA and NOFA.

*“Ideally word of mouth. That’s my favorite way. We have one woman who my friend who does a worker-share met at the flower farm – she seems like she might be looking for part-time work next year, so she’d be great.”*

WI Farmer

# Benefits That Attract Workers

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Working outdoors

**Socializing**

Schedule flexibility

Opportunity to learn, specialize

Food benefits

Opportunity to develop a small business

Farm culture

Location

Organic certification (healthy env)

Competitive Pay

Lack of other local options



*Farmers want an employee that will work independently. That they don't need to tell what to do. I think a lot of farmers are asking questions trying to get to that, like, can you work independently? But, because they aren't good at working with people they aren't good at asking those questions.*

OH Farm Worker

*Many Farmers are Challenging*

# On the job training is best

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Hands-on is better than a handbook. Of course, the books are good for reference, but workers like learning by doing.

*“I have been to some horticulture ventures that have an employee handbook that is really useful until you do it hands-on. You do it hands-on and you never need to read it again when it comes to farming.”*

OH Farm Worker



# Stress: Indecisiveness

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Workers reported additional stress when their employer was indecisive because that can create more work (and stress) for later.

*“So you have to weigh if this crop going to grow faster? Is it going to have foliage that overshadows the weeds? How long is it going to be growing until we harvest it? How profitable is it? All these different factors. So, to just say, ‘do what you feel is best’ makes me take on more responsibility than I think I’m being paid for (laughs).”*

OH Farm Worker



# Stress: Wearing too Many Hats

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Farm workers feel stress when they have many responsibilities as the sole employee.

*“You are usually doing everything as far as planning, labor, messing with the money, marketing, delivery, you got like 20 different hats and it’s hard to be really good at all of them.”*

OH Farm Worker



# Stress: No Contingency Plan

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Not having a backup plan can derail a day's work, or worse.

*“A lot of times when farms are hiring, they are panicking because they need work right now. Then you end up not doing due diligence hiring and end up with not a good employee or someone who costs more than you make off of them. A lot of different issues. The biggest issue with hiring the wrong person is creating a toxic environment.”*

OH Farm Worker



# Stress: Weather and Work

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Planning work that follows the weather

*“Insensitivity to worker needs would be a good example. You know, having us do the work in 110-degree greenhouse kind of thing on a day when we could have done it on a better day. That sort of thing. That was certainly a challenge.”*

VT Farm Worker



# Stress: Farmer Attitude

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Small-scale farming is difficult, and when things aren't working out, some bosses expect a lot and are difficult to work for.

*“Like from the outside they looked like they were doing well and then once I started working for them, I began to realize that really they weren't and they were so stressed out and they worked all day, every day... our food system really doesn't support the small farmer and a lot of them see it as a principled and ideal community and sustainability and it's almost like they're becoming martyrs.”*

OH Farm Worker



# Stress: More Contingency Planning

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When things don't go as planned, the boss gets in a bad mood.

*"the biggest challenge is honestly that nothing ever goes the way you want it to. You really have to adjust your perspective and your expectations and you have to be okay with things changing all the time. That was a hard lesson for me to learn in the first few years.... Like something breaks, or the weather changes, or you run out of this particular thing."*

OH Farm Worker





# Leadership and Teamwork

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*“it’s a team effort in a lot of ways. It’s like we’ve got to get in this entirety of cabbage. Today. Because it’s going to rain and they’re going into storage. You need that team to work cohesively, and you need leadership so that it works well.”*

*“I’ve had a farmer say, ‘people have told me I act this way when I’m stressed so just, be aware of that.’ He never apologized and he would yell at me and just be like ‘I told you that was how I was.’”*

OH Farm Worker



# Workers Appreciate Good Bosses

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Plan out their  
work and  
staffing

Are attentive to  
employee needs

Offer  
opportunities to  
learn

Are clear in their  
expectations

Have good  
management  
skills

Provide timely  
feedback

Offer Other  
Benefits

Enjoy working  
with others and  
sharing stories

Are good  
leaders and  
foster teamwork

In summary, some workers are intentional in their career choices.

They are attracted to farming

- Working outdoors
- Growing things and learning how to
- Social experiences and connecting with others

Many Workers Choose Farming

# Thank You

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operators.”*

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# Challenges of Farm Work

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## FARMER-RELATED

- Stress from employer's mood
- Stress from buyer's mood
- Stress from employer high expectations
- Stress from lack of detail in duties
- Long hours when working on a schedule for a buyer
- H2A competition – changing job duties
- Farmer indecisiveness or lack of leadership
- Does not like managing people
- Does not plan
- Not considering weather when planning greenhouse or field work
- Not taking the time to explain why things are done as they are

# Challenges of Farm Work

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## NATURE OF WORK

- Repetitive motion and stoop work
- Few employees so workers need to know “everything”
- Seasonal work means always looking for work
- Weather – heat of the summer
- Weather – delays, frustrating, make farmer cranky
- Things often do not go as planned

## POSITION DESIGN

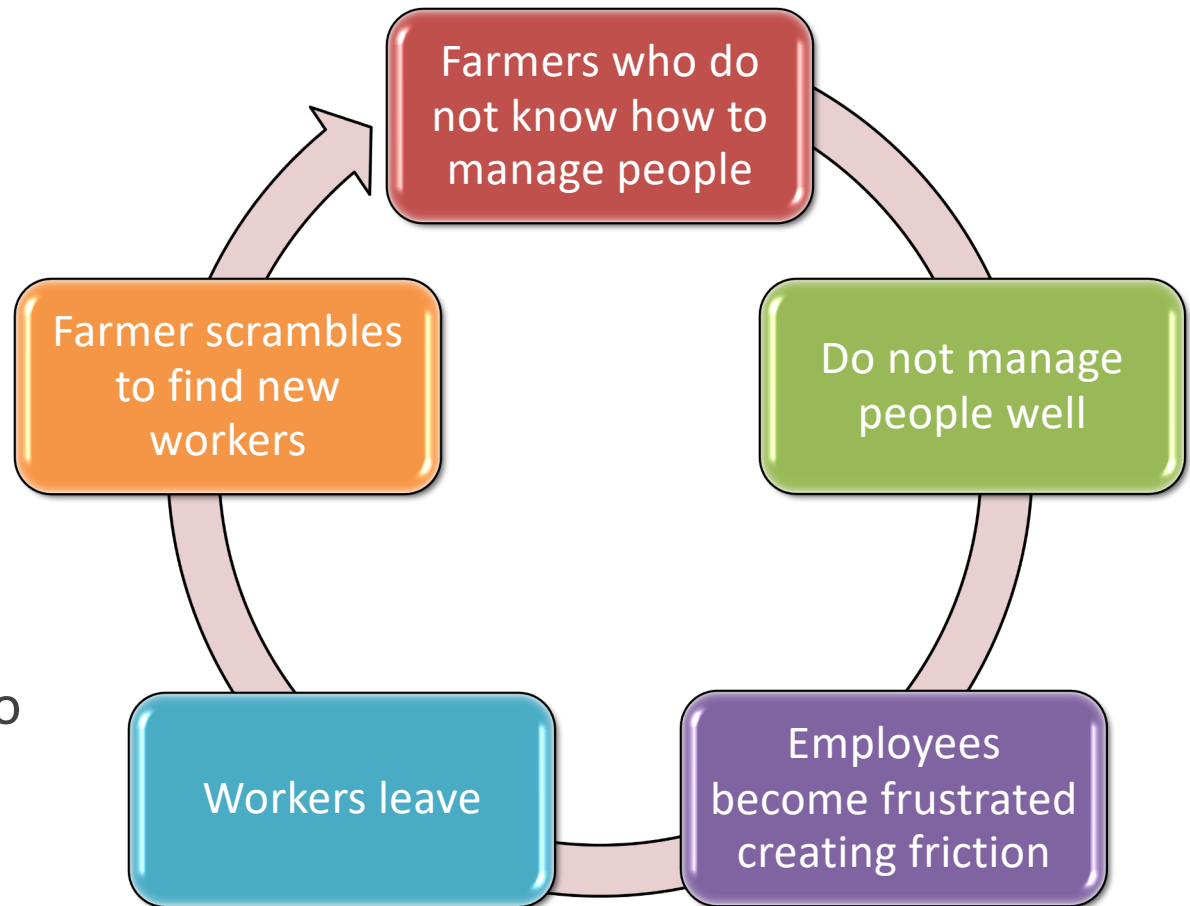
- Contract work is 1099 work (taxes)
- Few benefits like healthcare or childcare
- Commuting time
- Housing benefits can be misleading
- Low pay – 11 years manager experience making \$16/hour
- Low pay – need another source of financial security
- Low pay – hard to afford to work on a farm for too long

# Summary of Employee Perspectives on Managing

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This cycle will repeat itself until it is broken.

Farmers lacking management skills also tend to lack human resources skills.





# Many Farmers are Challenging

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## Coaching and mentoring

Communicating expectations and giving feedback often and timely rather than waiting for a performance review (or exploding!)