

A Family Owned Farm

Labor Case Study

12.1.14

A Mixed Labor Model

A family owned diversified organic vegetable farm that relies primarily on the MOFGA apprentice system for their summer labor, employs part-time labor, engages woofers, accepts volunteers, and coordinates a traditional community harvest day.

Mixed Labor Management

Every Sunday farm owners Paul and Amanda walk the farm to get a sense of what needs to be done that week so they can prepare for the Monday team meeting.

Apprentices - Monday a weekly prioritizing with Apprentices takes place and then they have a say in what they get involved in which increases motivation. Information about the overall

Paid Labor – During 3 days a week there are 1-2 paid laborers on the farm that are managed differently than apprentices. Tasks that come easily to farmers and might require a learning curve for paid labor are prioritized as learning opportunities for apprentices rather than using employee time that can better be spent on other tasks.

The Carrot Harvest - A 40 year tradition of involving community members in the harvest of more than 35,000lbs of carrots, parsnips, beets and turnips. For two days at the end of October 40 community members come together to share the experience of a full day of work and celebration of local bounty.

Woofers – visiting farm workers are considered a bonus, as they are usually working for short and intense periods of time, and it requires management time but it always depends on the woofers.

Volunteer labor - for people who are at the farm for such a short time it is hard for them to plug in, and so it is harder to manage, and they are often forgotten or overlooked in the planning process.

“The thing that is really difficult is that if you are actually serious about being a host to apprentices then you are spending a lot of time teaching, and that is not always the best use of someone’s labor. If that is not what you want to do then maybe you are better off getting paid labor.” Farm Owner

“There are times when we have thought that it might be sticky to have both kinds of labor together. For some farms it is better to choose between apprentices and paid labor, rather than mixing them. But we have managed quite well and I think it is all in how you treat people, and how you are set up.” Farm Owner

Apprentice Labor Model

Sharing Ownership

"If apprentices feel like they are cheap weeders they get discouraged, so you need to take what they want to learn into account. Reporting to them about all aspects of the farm, so they know the accounting, the numbers, what we made at the market, put them in charge and make them feel ownership."

Defining Question

"I always ask apprentices a defining question to get a sense of what their priorities are and it has to be in this order: organic vegetables, getting to know how animals are also a part of the cycle, learning homesteading, but spending most days in the fields."

Extracts of an Interview with Farm Owners

Apprentices receive a stipend of \$100/week and are provided with room and board: including electricity, wood, toiletries, food staples, work gloves, pocket-knives, and first aid. The rule of thumb is that apprentices should not have to spend money on living expenses while living there.

A former apprentice herself, farm owner says it is important to remind yourself that "you are not an hourly laborer", which is something she has emphasized to apprentices to clarify working relationship.

The Application/Interview process

Communicating the different areas of interest in order of farmers' priority need for labor is important. For this family owned diversified farm most of their labor goes towards Fieldwork & Prep Work with an emphasis on vegetables, herbs, and work in hoop houses during the summer months. In addition about 10 % of labor is dedicated to Husbandry, 4% Maintenance, 4% Homestead, 1% Orchard / 1% Woodwork.

6 Steps to an Apprentice Interview Process

- Step 1** - Red flags for personality traits based on having to live and work together.
- Step 2** - Identify interests and labor needs based on what they are looking to learn.
- Step 3** - Matching interest and farm life to prevent having problems down the road.
- Step 4** - Farmers recommend and value visiting and talking to as many farms as possible.
- Step 5** - Evaluate work ethic but clarify that previous work experience is not essential.
- Step 6** - Information on how the farm works, daily structure, meals, team structure, work ethic.