

Farmworkers positive about their jobs, but suggest improvements

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A study conducted in 1995 reveals farmworkers are generally content with their jobs. Seasonal and year-round workers in orchard, vineyard, vegetable, agronomic, dairy and livestock operations in the Northern San Joaquin Valley were interviewed. Workers were generally complimentary to both supervisors and farm employers. One worker summed it up best, when he explained that he loved the job but it would be perfect if it paid better. An important implication is that workers may not necessarily be looking for work outside of agriculture. The 265 survey participants did, however, suggest numerous changes that supervisors and farm employers can make to improve the working conditions of agricultural laborers. Their suggestions included treating workers with more respect, constructive criticism of job performance, reasonable work pace and complete job instructions.

Traditionally, agricultural work has not been held in high regard by the general population. It has been viewed as unpleasant, and an undesirable way to earn a living. Farm workers, however, do not generally share this negative view of farm work. For the most part, they appreciate the work and respect their employers. But their working environment could be improved in ways that would benefit both employees and employers.

Many people view farm work as hard, unrewarding work; necessary, but unsatisfactory. This opinion is supported by the popular press, which often seems to speak disparagingly of farm work, such as in the award-winning series, "Fields of Pain" (Wagner and Breton 1991) that appeared in *The Sacramento Bee* newspaper. In addition, some think farmworkers share that opinion. However, this study conducted in 1995 in the Northern San Joaquin Valley reveals a more accurate picture of how farmworkers feel about their work. We interviewed 265 seasonal and year-round workers in orchard, vineyard, vegetable, agronomic,

dairy and livestock operations, and asked a number of questions to determine their true feelings and perceptions about their work.

This is the third part in a series of findings on workers' feelings and preferences. In earlier *California Agriculture* reports, we focused on workers' feelings about pay method (piece rate versus hourly) and employer preference (grower versus farm labor contractor) (Billikopf 1996, 1997).

Interviewing workers

Our objective was to find out how farmworkers felt about their jobs and to determine what improvements could be made to their working environment. We asked farmworkers to rate their present job, to give reasons why they would quit other jobs, and to comment on the quality of supervision. Their responses provided a rich mix of suggestions and comments on the quality of supervision. While the emphasis of the study dealt with feelings about direct supervision, we also solicited comments and suggestions for the farm employers.

Present job rating

Jobs were rated on a 1 to 5 scale, in which a fantastic job was rated a 5, and a terrible one was rated a 1. On the average, farmworkers rated their present jobs a 4 (n = 253). Crew workers (n = 201), as well as other field workers (n = 20) such as irrigators and equipment operators, rated their jobs a 3.9, while dairy personnel rated theirs a 4.4 (n = 24).

Reasons for leaving

To determine the level of dissatisfaction with a job, we asked workers if they had ever quit a job without having another one to go to. Of 115 workers responding to this question, 66% (n = 76) had not quit without a job in hand. The other 34% gave a combined 44 reasons for leaving. (While most had one main reason to leave, some had multiple concerns.)

Reasons for leaving included pay issues (57%, n = 25); personal issues, such as the death of a relative, (9%, n = 4); *carrilla*, a feeling of being constantly pushed to do more (7%, n = 3); being insulted by the supervisor (7%, n = 3); interpersonal conflicts with supervisor (5%, n = 2); preference for different type of agricultural work (5%, n = 2); need to obtain more hours/longer season (5%, n = 2); a mean or angry employer (2%, n = 1); no social security paid by grower (2%, n = 1); and not being provided with gas for personal car when driving for work (2%, n = 1).

Feelings toward supervisors

Most subjects had positive feelings towards their supervisors. Although one respondent felt his supervisor never made him feel good about his job performance, in contrast, 13 subjects (9.5%) felt their supervisor made them feel good all the time. When asked what the supervisor could do to improve, 28% (n = 51) said they had not thought about it or had no suggestions for improvement, and another 28% (n = 52) felt their supervisors should not make any changes, that they were good supervisors. Nineteen subjects answered that all supervisors were the same. We asked 16 of them a follow-up question: "The same good, or the same bad?" The unanimous answer was, "The same good."

Likewise, of the 168 total comments and suggestions (from 140 subjects) about farm employers, 22 were positive statements about their present employer, such as "Este patrón es una maravilla!" (roughly translated as "This boss is marvelous!") and "These are the best people in the state to work for, people either retire or die on the job. There is practically no turnover."

Good vs. bad management

To better understand the workers' feelings about the quality of agricultural supervision, we asked workers to complete the sentences: "My supervisor makes me feel good when..." (n = 141), and "My supervi-

sor makes me feel poorly when..." (n = 137). It soon became apparent, however, that at least some workers were answering the question in a more generic form, as they might say, "My supervisor makes me feel poorly when he shouts at me," only to add, "But this does not happen at this ranch."

We asked a subset of 36 respondents to describe the best versus the worst supervisor they had had. Workers also responded to the question, "What could your supervisor do to make your job better?" (n = 183). With these questions, we tried to elicit the same information from different angles. Rather than artificially dividing the results, the responses have been combined and listed in order of frequency in Table 1.

A subset of respondents also had the opportunity to make comments or give suggestions to their farm employers. To a large extent, these results overlap with those directed to first line supervisors. To avoid redundancy, these comments are incorporated into the main categories in Table 1.

Study results reveal little about what percentage of farm supervisors or farm employers engage in specific practices. Rather, it lists issues in order of general importance and frequency of concern to agricultural workers. In some cases, responses fell under more than one category, and the decision to place such responses in one category over another was a subjective one.

Interpersonal communications

Behaviors in this category relate to content and tone of communications, approachability of supervisor, and effectiveness of two-way communication. When supervisors behave in a positive manner, they are showing *respeto* (respect) and good manners for those they supervise.

Airs of superiority. Workers value supervisors who, by word and action, show they are no more important than those they supervise. One supervisor earned much respect because he was willing to get his hands dirty and "treat himself as a working person." The opposite was true of supervisors who tried to build distance with the

TABLE 1. Categories of supervisorial and management behaviors ranked in order of concern to farm workers

Areas of worker concern	Directed to supervisors	Suggestions for employers	Totals
Interpersonal communications	173 (1)*	58 (1)	231 (1)
Performance evaluation, informal	90 (2)	8 (5)	98 (2)
Work pace	59 (3)	4 (7)	63 (4)
Job assignment & instructions	55 (4)	2 (10)	57 (5)
Pay issues	38 (5)	48 (2)	86 (3)
Helpfulness & organization	17 (6)	3 (8)	20 (7)
Work/work hours	15 (7)	9 (4)	24 (6)
Toilets & water	12 (8)	3 (8)	15 (8)
Favoritism	8 (9)	1 (11)	9 (11)
Food / drink	5 (10)	1 (11)	6 (12)
Supervisor in mediator role	5 (10)	—	5 (13)
Loans & rides	3 (12)	—	3 (14)
Safety	3 (12)	7 (6)	10 (10)
Dishonesty	1 (14)	—	1 (15)
Personal habits	1 (14)	—	1 (15)
Supervision, proper selection of foremen	—	14 (3)	14 (9)

*Parenthetical numbers are rankings, from most often to least often mentioned.

workers, by humiliating or devaluing them, or by attempting to appear superior. The latter was sometimes accomplished through insults; for example, a female supervisor insulted some of the men who worked for her by questioning their masculinity. Another supervisor told a woman, "You must be a really good cook!" "Not really, why do you say that?" she inquired. "Because you certainly are no good as an employee," he retorted.

Tone of communication. Respondents prefer to be spoken to in a calm way (slower speed, low volume). They are offended by scolding, harsh words, shouting, angry, quick speech and finger snapping.

Mood and language. Workers look up to supervisors who seem cheerful, try to motivate with kind and positive words, or permit music. They dislike those who come to work in a surly or bad mood, or use vulgar, profane or foul language.

Approachability. Workers respect understanding and flexible supervisors to whom they can bring suggestions, disagreements, or problems and not be subjected to retaliation. Workers especially wish the farm employer would come out on occasion, interact with them, and do some of the work and thus get a feeling for the effort required.

Friendliness. Supervisors who spend more time with the workers, participate in two-way conversations, listen, joke, and participate in self disclosure are viewed as being more friendly and positive.

Discrimination. Workers dislike it when they or others are subjected to racial discrimination or sexual harassment. A suggestion was offered to divide crews by gender and thus reduce exposure to vulgar language from coworkers.

Performance evaluation, informal

Even when workers know they've made a mistake, they have difficulty accepting criticism. The ability of supervisors to motivate workers through positive feedback is highly valued.

Criticism. One worker explained that his supervisor was able to give

constructive criticism by saying, "I had the same problem at first, but I got better at it." Correcting with *respeto* and "good manners" was contrasted with corrections involving put-downs. It is disliked when supervisors "looked over workers' shoulders," closely inspected employees' work, criticized them about trivial details, or made threats. Criticism is especially painful when it is considered unfair; when workers feel they do not have control over results; or when action is taken against employees without an explanation. Respondents suggested that managers should be slow to criticize and quick to praise.

Praise. Nonverbal (such as a pat on the back) and verbal signs of recognition are very much appreciated by workers. One cherished the words of acknowledgment, albeit ungrammatical, received from his grower-supervisor: *Mexicano mucho bueno*. (The use of nationality in a compliment or in an insult has the effect of doubling the impact of either.) One worker remembered a bittersweet compliment from his father: "He tells others I am a miracle worker but doesn't tell me."

Assignment and instructions

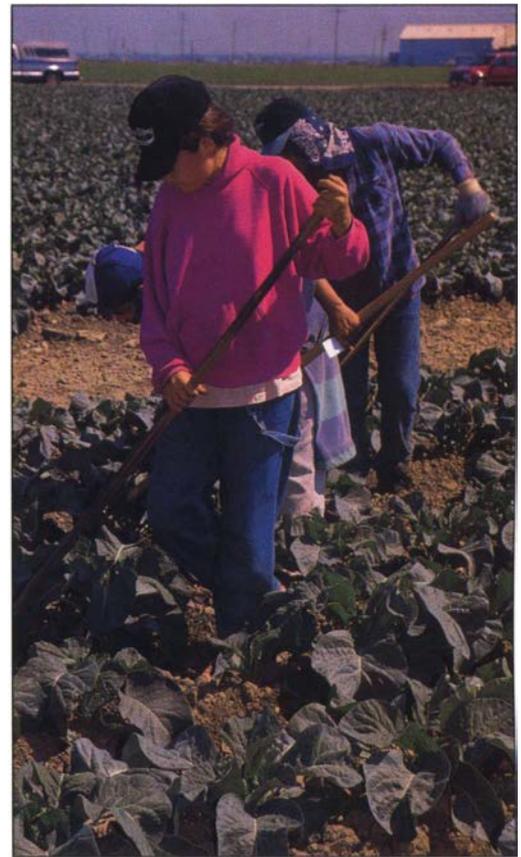
Workers value being asked politely to work, being told the purpose of the assignment and receiving complete instructions.

Supervisor knowledge. Workers feel that an effective supervisor has to have a good understanding of the job (e.g., to avoid being asked to do something incorrectly, such as re-using towels to dry cow teats before milking).

Tone. Effective supervisors are patient and make requests in kind manner (including the word, "please"). In contrast, poor supervisors are impatient or rush through explanations, and do not like to be asked questions.

Purpose. Workers appreciate supervisors who take the time to share the purpose of an assignment.

Clarity and completeness. Complete, clear instructions are valued in contrast to having to guess what the supervisor wants. Effective supervisors go beyond giving instructions to providing training.



For workers, being treated with respect means being spoken to in a friendly tone.

Chain of command. Workers do not like when someone other than their supervisor gives them orders.

Seniority. It is not always apparent to workers why others with less experience or seniority get coveted assignments.

Added responsibility. Workers appreciate added responsibility in terms of delegated assignments, promotions, and job rotation. A suggestion was made that workers should be trained for contingencies such as a coworker's absence.

Other working conditions

Employees feel they need to receive higher pay, and be paid fully, relatively frequently, and on time. Records should not be manipulated to avoid paying overtime. Group incentives that don't reward individual achievement, and games associated with piece-rate wages (Billikopf 1996), should be avoided. Pay differences between workers should be better explained, and pay stubs should indicate who the employer is.

Some supervisors leave the work pace much to the workers, while others constantly push for faster speeds, or nag for better quality work.

Workers are grateful for their jobs and appreciate when they are kept busy and working, with little or no downtime between jobs. A suggestion was made that fewer laborers should be utilized, but for a longer work period. A few employees expressed a desire for shorter days, so they could spend more time with the family. A worker was grateful that he was allowed to take time off for special occasions. One worker wished his farm labor contractor would provide jobs closer to home. Another suggested that vacations should be offered.

Workers appreciate supervisors who will help them when asked; and even better, supervisors who truly understand the job and can anticipate workers' needs. Organized supervisors know how to avoid bottlenecks, for instance: by having sorters arrive to set up earlier than pickers; by making sure weeds are out of the way; or by providing needed supplies or tools in a timely manner. One worker suggested another worker was needed in order to get the job done.

Workers expect cold water with ice, and clean toilets near their work area.

Several respondents want to be protected from foreman reprisals. It was suggested that employers exercise care in selecting foremen, and that these foremen be trained to treat workers well, give orders properly, avoid acting superior, not shout at or scold workers, and know how to perform the job well themselves. One worker wished farmers would not always take the side of the foreman when there was a disagreement. Another suggested that farmers should have rules that supervisors had to follow. One suggested that foremen should be rotated (e.g., among crews). One employee felt growers should not hire farm labor contractors as they were abusive.

Safety concerns include the need for safety rules; training (e.g., proper lifting); proper equipment (e.g., goggles and dust masks when working in

dusty conditions, such as knocking almonds); a first aid kit (and not let the supplies in the kit get depleted); water for hand-washing to remove pesticide residues; and a meal to celebrate an accident-free year.

Workers expect not to be subjected to discrimination or favoritism. One worker felt he was subject to reverse nepotism, as more was required of him by his father than of other workers.

Workers appreciate when supervisors provide food or sodas, or the farm employer organizes an end-of-season meal for the crew.

An important role for the supervisor, as seen by the workers, is as an effective communicator between themselves and management. One supervisor was praised for being a good buffer toward top management. Supervisors are, in some instances, expected to help obtain raises for the workers. Workers resent being made to look foolish in front of management, when rules were not followed, or when supervisors consistently take the side of the employer.

Workers are content

Despite all that has been written about the negative aspects of farm work, this study found that workers are content with their jobs. One worker summed it up best, when he explained that he loved the job but it would be perfect if it paid better. An important implication is that workers may not necessarily be looking for work outside of agriculture. Given that many farm workers do not have many career choices, more harm than good may be done by those who speak in negative ways about farm work. Workers were generally complimentary to both supervisors and farm employers.

There are, however, numerous changes that supervisors and farm employers can make to improve the working conditions of those who labor in agriculture.

Recommendations

Here are some recommendations for those interested in improving

worker satisfaction and morale.

1. Show enthusiasm for your own job, continue to learn more, and share knowledge with employees. Encourage workers to ask questions and share concerns, disagreements, and suggestions.

2. Reduce, rather than create, social distance by being friendly, and by treating yourself as a "working person." Avoid profanity, name calling, loud tones, snapping of fingers, and any untoward or discourteous behavior.

3. Compliment worker successes. Listen to a worker's perspective before punishing questionable behavior. Avoid criticism that sounds like a personal attack.

4. Be attentive to workers' needs: Keep a sufficient amount of supplies at hand, offer to help lift awkward or heavy items, organize activities to reduce bottlenecks, offer suggestions or help to those who are struggling with a task.

5. Provide cold drinking water, disposable paper cups, soap and water for washing hands, disposable towels and clean toilets near the place of work.

6. Hire foremen and supervisors with care. Provide ongoing training for supervisors. Rotate supervisors to different crews. Establish a grievance procedure to handle concerns with harassment, favoritism, or abusive treatment.

7. Establish and maintain a safety program.

8. Provide end-of-season meals. (This is most effective when the farm employer provides the meat and ingredients and lets the workers cook the meal themselves.)

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