



## Farmers in Transition

# Finding a New Career

Damona G. Doye<sup>1</sup>  
Extension Economist

Eileen St. Pierre, Ph.D., CFA  
Assistant Professor  
Personal Finance Specialist

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Fact Sheets  
are also available on our website at:  
<http://osufacts.okstate.edu>

A job search is difficult under any circumstances. For farmers who must seek supplemental off farm employment or are forced from their farms, the task may seem impossible.

*"When you've had a job you've gone to everyday of your life, you can't think about what it means to look for one. I don't know how to begin looking for a new job."*

*"I thought it might be difficult to find a job, but I never knew that it would be this bad. I just can't seem to figure out what I really want to do."*

*"Having been on a farm all my life, I don't know if I have any skills. It is hard to know what is out there. I can't seem to find any job that is right for me."*

This Fact Sheet describes three essential steps in an effective job career search. Discussion of the services provided by professional career counselors and placement offices and a list of reference books on finding employment are also included.

### A Career versus a Job

A job is more than a paycheck. It reflects who you are, your success in life, and your position in the community. It also affects your well-being.

Farmers traditionally see farming as a life-long career. Their identities and self-worth are closely related to their work. When they no longer rely on farming for their livelihood, they lose more than their paychecks. They also lose the purpose and value in their lives.

*"I took the first job that was offered: driving a school bus. It was something to do, but it wasn't what I wanted. There was nothing to the job except a paycheck. I felt that my life meant nothing. It wasn't worth a nickel."*

*"When I was on the farm, I got up every day and started a new day of my life. Now I get up and just go to a job. Life isn't the same anymore. There isn't much to it."*

As these comments illustrate, dissatisfaction with one's job can have demoralizing effects. Displaced farmers and farm families requiring supplemental incomes need to find not just a job but a satisfying career.

### The Importance of a Positive Attitude

Employment searches require perseverance, resourcefulness, and, above all, a positive attitude. A positive attitude helps you deal with the emotions, reduce the stress, and overcome the obstacles of your search. In short, it increases the probability of success. In contrast, a negative attitude often generates frustration and discouragement.

*"You have to have the right perspective before you start looking for a job. Try and think of this: today is the first day of the rest of your life. A lot of people never get this chance. They are stuck in a job they hate and never get out. This is an opportunity to do something new. I think this helps when you are out there "selling yourself" for a job."*

The man who made this statement had spent most of his working life on a farm and was deeply hurt when he was forced to sell. Once he got over his anger, however, he saw his job search as an opportunity, not a burden.

Maintaining a positive perspective while looking for a job can be difficult. Farmers who can no longer remain on the farm often see themselves as a failure and suffer feelings of self-doubt.

*"I wonder if I will flop at another job as I did at farming. How can I think about doing anything else?"*

It is critical that you overcome these negative feelings. Remember, many farmers are being forced out or forced to scale down because of economic conditions beyond their control.

### The Job/Career Search

There are three basic steps to an effective job search: assessing your skills and interests, identifying appropriate areas of employment and locating employment.

### Assessing Your Skills and Interests

Your self-assessment will be your foundation for defining who you are and what you have to offer an employer. The assessment serves several purposes: it identifies your marketable skills and abilities, builds self-confidence, and helps you identify which profession best matches your abilities and interests.

To begin your self-assessment, you must identify your specific skills and abilities. This step is not easy. People tend to take their skills for granted and think they have few talents.

<sup>1</sup> Updated from an earlier publication by Tracy R. Hyer, Damona Doye and Ross O. Love.

*"I don't have any marketable skills. Farmers are jacks-of-all-trades and masters of none. This is why it's very difficult for farmers to get jobs."*

Actually, nearly everyone has many skills that could be readily applied to a variety of professions. The exercise that follows will no doubt point out that you have marketable skills, too. Complete each of the following steps:

How do you identify your skills? One farmer suggested a method that worked very well for him.

**Step 1: Take a piece of paper and write down all the skills you have.** For starters, consider the following:

- Can you fix plumbing?
- Can you do carpentry?
- Can you fix machines?
- Can you cultivate crops?
- Can you raise animals?
- Can you devise financial reports?
- Can you manage employees?
- Are you on any committees?
- Do you hold any offices?

Don't worry about whether you like the task, and don't worry if it doesn't seem very practical. Just write everything down.

**Step 2: Get input from others about how they perceive you and your abilities.** Often others can help you list your skills and abilities. This brainstorming exercise should get you started. Now think back a few years and include past activities.

**Step 3: Take a new piece of paper and write down specific skills, for instance, carpentry.** Write a paragraph under it describing exactly what you can do. Then provide examples of previous work to document abilities. Try to include as much detail as you can. For example, did you build an addition to the house or erect a pole shed? Did you supervise others? Did you do all the planning? Was your work successful? You may want to write several paragraphs. Do this for each of the skills on your list. Now you have both identified and described your skills.

As you write, think of ways to quantify your accomplishments. If you implemented a new record-keeping system for expenses, for example, include that you reduced your expenses by several percent. Quantifying your accomplishments is a way to provide evidence of your skills.

The next step of the self-assessment is to identify your interests. Activities you enjoy may overlap, but will not always. Maybe you have fixed the plumbing in your house and barn many times, but disliked the task. Plumbing would not be a suitable choice for a profession.

Go through your skills list and mark those activities that you enjoy doing. Among the tasks that do not interest you, identify "transferable skills" that could be used in activities you do like. You may not want to be a plumber, for example, but your success in doing this task shows that you are able to analyze a problem, evaluate possible options, and implement solutions. These skills are evidence that you take initiative and have problem solving abilities, two skills useful in any profession, thus strengthening your marketability.

## Identifying Appropriate Employment

The next step is to determine the characteristics of your ideal job. These characteristics relate to your interests, skills, values, and goals. Not every job or career possibility will meet your criteria. In fact, most people find only a few professions fit them well. Determining what is important to you in a job helps focus your search, boosts your self-confidence, and increases your chances of success.

Many people overlook this step entirely. Instead of seeking appropriate employment, they panic and apply for every available position, thinking they are increasing the probability of an offer. In fact, many of these positions would not be suitable for the applicants even if they were offered the jobs. Time and effort are wasted that could be used to look for more appropriate employment. The result of this haphazard approach is often an unsatisfactory and unsuitable job.

*"I panicked after the auction and grabbed the first job I could find. I was a salesman. Deep inside I knew it wasn't right, but I took it anyway. It was terrible; I just couldn't make sales. To get out of this job, I accepted another. But I know this one isn't right for me either. I really don't know what is right for me anymore."*

To get you started in describing your desired position, answer the following questions (don't worry whether your list of characteristics matches or does not match your previous work experience):

- Do I want a job that will allow me to continue farming and at what level?
- Do I want to work indoors, outdoors, or both?
- Do I want to work on a farm, in agriculture, or in another industry or service profession?
- Do I want to be supervised or completely unsupervised?
- Do I want to work alone or in a group?
- Do I want to work in the same community I'm in now or move or commute to another community?
- Do I want to work with machines, animals, plants, or people?
- Do I want a very secure position?
- Do I want to be challenged by learning new skills?
- Do I want to participate in decision making?
- Do I want many responsibilities?
- Do I want a job that involves physical or manual labor?

This list is only the beginning. Come up with more questions and characteristics on your own. Other job characteristics you may want to consider are those of pay, employee benefits (such as a health plan, vacation and sick leave) and opportunity for advancement.

Once you have completed your list, rank the characteristics in order of importance to you. Number 1 should be absolutely essential to any job, number 2 next important, and so on. Ranking can be frustrating, but rarely do you find employment that has everything you want. It is important to identify high priorities, the job characteristics which are essential.

*"More than anything else, I had to have a job that let me work outside. Being indoors would drive me crazy, so I got into construction. I also want to work on my own. But that was second to being outside."*

Ranking your characteristics helps you identify possible fields of employment and appropriate positions. By concentrating your effort and energy on a few specific areas, you are likely to increase your chances of finding a satisfying job.

## Locating Job Opportunities

How long does it take to find a job? It depends on your area of the country, your qualifications and the type of job that you are looking for. Your list of skills and the characteristics of your "dream" job will probably not match exactly. The areas where there is overlap, however, should suggest fields of employment best suited for you. The problem then is to find out if employment opportunities exist.

Most people who are on a job search turn first to the help-wanted sections of their local newspapers. Although they are one way to learn of openings, studies have shown that newspapers list only 20 percent of all available openings. Further, newspaper advertisements receive many replies, reducing the likelihood of your being hired.

A second and much more effective way to find out about employment opportunities is by talking to people who hold positions in fields in which you would like to work. These informational interviews are valuable in any employment search and serve several purposes:

- 1) By talking to other people, you become familiar with available positions, their responsibilities, and employment outlook.
- 2) You refine your criteria for employment. For example, based on your interests and skills, you may think you would like to be an animal technician. Once you talk to a technician, however, you may discover that the job does not meet your most important criteria for employment.
- 3) You may learn about job possibilities you had not considered. The animal technician may help you realize, for example, that your skills and interests are well suited to a job selling animal nutrient supplements.
- 4) You can learn about unadvertised openings and the names of people to contact.
- 5) Finally, an informational interview gives you a chance to discuss your qualifications and "sell yourself" so you can be remembered for future vacancies.

Farmers have a significant advantage over people in many other occupations in that they meet a wide variety of professionals every day on their farms. These people—feed dealers, mechanics, veterinarians, builders, accountants, computer representatives, artificial inseminators, insurance salespeople, electricians—are a valuable network for the farmer who is looking for a job.

*"A farmer's best asset is the network of people he or she meets every day. This more than anything else will be a help in finding a job. We stayed in this community for that reason. By talking to this network you can learn a lot about the jobs, how people got their jobs, what skills they needed, the company they work for, whether jobs are open in their company or in other companies, and a whole lot more. This network is the most valuable resource a farmer has."*

From the "experts" - It takes three months to find a job that pays \$40,000. Add one month for every \$10,000 you want in salary. Another way to look at it, on average it takes one week for every \$2,000 in annual income. Other factors that influence the duration of a job search include:

- The economy
- Worker demand
- Your particular job market

- Number of qualified applicants
- An applicant's presentation to an employer
- Being in the right place at the right time
- Good old-fashioned luck

How you search for a job and how flexible you are in your search also matter. Are you willing to adjust your expectations regarding wages, companies, locations, and job positions desired? How much time do you devote each week to searching?

## Employment Counselors and Services

Some farmers go through the three steps outlined above and find satisfying jobs without assistance. Others turn to professional counselors for help in solving problems, thus possibly speeding the progress of the search significantly. Counselors are available through many organizations and agencies:

- Local high schools, agricultural and technical schools, and community colleges. Call to learn more about their services.
- State and private employment agencies. The quality of these services varies considerably.
- Job Training Partnership Program (JTPA). This program offers numerous services to farmers looking for employment, including training, career counseling, and skills assessment. JTPA is listed in the phone book under your county. In some counties, it is called the Employment and Training office.
- Cooperative Extension Service. Although Extension educators are not career counselors, they are excellent sources for names of counselors, referrals for informational interviews, and leads on unadvertised openings.

Your meeting with a professional will be greatly enhanced if you go through the three steps—assessing your skills and interest, identifying appropriate employment and locating job opportunities beforehand. The counselor will then be able to give you specific recommendations.

Other sources of information about employment and positions include the following:

- Career offices in local colleges. Libraries in many agricultural, technical, and community colleges have extensive collections of books that describe professions, directories with job-related information, how-to guides, and other sources of information.
- Oklahoma State Employment Service. This agency posts positions in state and local government, agencies, and businesses. Check in your local phone book under "Oklahoma State Employment Service."
- Public Libraries. Many public libraries have books and video tapes on occupational planning and employment searches.

## Internet Job Search

Using the internet is now an integral part of any job search. You can look up information about a prospective employer or career online. This can help you prepare for an interview or see if a prospective job would be a good fit. By registering at the company's online career site, you can request position announcements matching certain criteria be e-mailed to you as soon as they are posted.

Many prospective employers now require you to submit an online application. In addition to a paper resume, you need to have several versions of your resume in computer files to upload for online job applications. Below is a list of websites to assist in your internet job search:

1. OK Dept of Labor
  - <http://www.ok.gov/odol>
  - Go to Job Link
2. National Job Boards:
  - Monster at <http://www.monster.com>
  - Career Builder at <http://www.careerbuilder.com>
  - Yahoo Hot Jobs at <http://hotjobs.yahoo.com>
3. Specific Industry Job Boards
4. Local or county government job listings
5. Federal Government (USAJobs)
  - <http://www.usajobs.gov>
6. Official State of Oklahoma job site (Office of Personnel Management)
  - <http://www.ok.gov/opm>
7. OK government jobs
  - Go to <http://federaljobs.com> and there is a link to OK government jobs

## A Reminder

Finding a satisfying job takes time. Nationally, the average employment search takes 16 weeks. Start your search as soon as you think you will be leaving farming or will need supplemental off-farm income. Time and effort will greatly increase your chances of finding a satisfying new career.

## Recommended Books

The following books are available in most bookstores, libraries, and college placement offices. They can also be ordered from the publisher.

## General Job-Search Skills

- Beatty, Richard, H. *The Resume Kit*. John Wiley, & Sons, Inc., New York, 1984.
- Berlanger, Don. *Want a Job? Get Some Experience. Want Experience? Get a Job*. AMACOM, New York, NY, 1978.
- Bolles, Richard N. *What Color Is Your Parachute-A Practical Manual for Job Hunters and Career Changes*. Berkeley; Ten Speed Press.
- Bolles, Richard N. *The Quick Job-Hunting Map*. Berkeley; Ten Speed Press.
- Crystal, John C. and Richard N. Bolles. *Where Do I Go From Here With My Life*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1974.
- Figler, Howard. *The Complete Job Search Handbook*. New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1980.
- German, Donald R. and German, John W. *How To Find A Job When Jobs Are Hard To Find*. AMACOM, New York, NY, 1981.
- Krannich, Caryl Rae. *Interview for Success*. Impact Publications, Virginia beach, VA, 1982.
- Lathrop, Richard. *Don't Use a Resume...Use a Qualifications Brief*. Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, CA, 1980.

## Intereviewing Skills

- Medley, H. Anthony. *Sweaty Palms*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1984.

## Other OSU Fact Sheets in this series:

- AGEC-193 Monitoring Your Farm Financial Situation
- AGEC-194 Taking Charge
- AGEC-197 Coping with the Partial Reduction or Loss of the Family Farm
- AGEC-195 Evaluating Options for Change
- AGEC-198 Negotiation Strategies
- AGEC-213 Farm Family Decision-Making

Oklahoma State University, in compliance with Title VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Executive Order 11246 as amended, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and other federal laws and regulations, does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, age, religion, disability, or status as a veteran in any of its policies, practices, or procedures. This includes but is not limited to admissions, employment, financial aid, and educational services.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Robert E. Whitson, Director of Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Vice President, Dean, and Director of the Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of 20 cents per copy, 0310 GH.