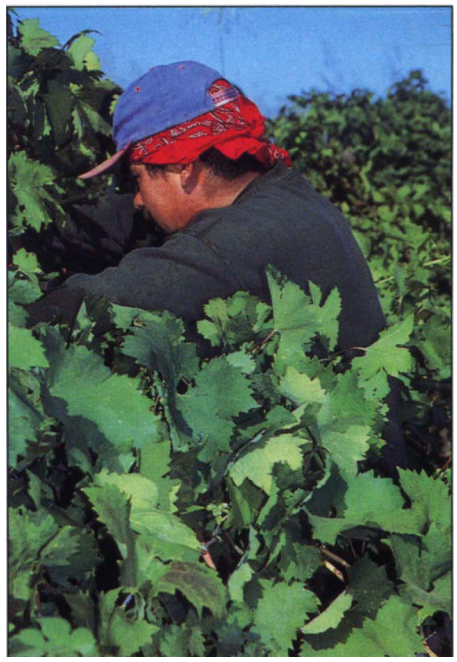
Workers prefer growers over FLCs

Gregory Encina Billikopf



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Most crew workers preferred to work directly for growers than through farm labor contractors.

Given a choice, crew workers overwhelmingly prefer working for a grower rather than for a farm labor contractor. FLCs generally have a couple of advantages over growers including less of a language barrier and the potential for providing longer work seasons. Nevertheless, workers perceive growers as providing more work (per day and per season); better pay, benefits and working conditions; better treatment; and even better communication and instructions.

A recent study explored grower preferences for hiring directly or using farm labor contractors (FLCs) as intermediaries (*California Agriculture* March-April 1996). In contrast, this study examines worker preferences. A better understanding of what workers value can benefit farm employers — both growers and FLCs — who want to attract and retain a productive work force. Dissatisfied workers are more likely to increase turnover rates and reduce productivity.

We interviewed 211 crew workers at 19 job sites in an attempt to determine a preference for employment directly with a grower or through an FLC intermediary. These interviews took place in the northern San Joaquin Valley in a large variety of orchard, vineyard and vegetable operations in the summer of 1995. Most crew workers were interviewed while they worked, with consent from their supervisor or employer. Most of the workers doing crew work were Latino, and nearly all of the interviews were conducted in Spanish. At the time of the interview, 63% (n = 133) of the crew workers were employed by FLCs, while only 37% (n = 78) were hired directly by growers.

Most of the crew workers (51%, n = 106) had worked only for a grower or only for an FLC. Among those who had experienced working under both an FLC and a grower, there was an overwhelming preference for growers as employers (81%, n = 84). Only 4% of crew workers favored working for FLCs. The remaining crew workers either had no preference (14%, n = 14) or said their choice would depend on other factors (2%, n = 2).

Some crew workers were vocal in denouncing FLCs: "They should eliminate FLCs," "FLCs are despots," "Burn FLCs' licenses," "I wish FLCs did not exist," and "FLCs prefer undocumented workers they can abuse." Others were quick to defend FLCs: "This contractor is excellent! Write it down!", and "I had a good contractor who treated me well and gave me $200 so I could get legalized."

Crew workers who had worked for both growers and FLCs were asked to give a reason for their preference between working for a grower and an FLC. Questions were open ended.

Preference for growers

Crew workers gave the following reasons to support their preference for growers over FLCs.

Pay. Of 111 comments buttressing worker predilection for growers, 69 (62%) dealt with pay. Crew workers felt that growers paid a "little more" than FLCs (n = 49, 44%). According to crew workers, FLCs were sometimes guilty of not paying what they owed; not paying without a struggle on the part of the workers; and not paying on a timely basis (n = 9, 8%). Furthermore, workers were unhappy that part of their salary went to the FLC (n = 6, 5%) and that they were not informed by FLCs whether they were working for piece rate or hourly pay (n = 4, 4%). One worker was concerned that FLCs might not always pay wage-related taxes.

Treatment and working conditions. Thirty comments (27%) centered around treatment or working conditions. Concerns included better, less-abusive treatment by growers (n = 15, 14%); being able to deal with directly, receiving better explanations and fewer conflicts when dealing with growers (n = 6, 5%); work for growers being slower paced (n = 5, 5%); growers being more likely to provide breaks and toilets in the fields (n = 2, 2%); less stoop work arranged by growers (n = 1, 1%); and FLCs more likely to fire a worker "who misses a little work" (n = 1, 1%).

Benefits. Eight comments (7%) dealt with benefits, mostly about fewer FLCs providing health insurance (n = 6, 5%). One worker spoke of benefits in general and another mentioned grower-furnished housing.

More work. Four comments (6%) revolved around the ability of growers to offer more constant work or longer hours.

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Preference for FLCs

Only four comments favored FLCs over growers: lack of a language barrier; FLCs are less likely to get angry; FLCs provide better supervision; and FLCs pay better. Some of these seem to contradict comments made by those who preferred growers, but people's perceptions are molded by their personal experiences.

Conclusions

This study was part of a larger research project in which crew workers were asked questions about a number of other issues that concern them. There was more agreement about the preference for working for growers over FLCs than any other issue. Crew workers overwhelmingly prefer jobs working directly for growers rather than for FLCs. In contrast to FLCs, growers are perceived as providing superior pay, benefits and working conditions; treating workers better; communicating instructions more clearly; and providing extended hours of work per day and per season.

Yet FLCs have several advantages, including less of a language barrier and the potential for providing longer hours of work beyond those required at any one farm operation. FLCs are likely to improve their image with crew workers if they (1) arrange for smoother transitions between work at one operation and the next; (2) pay workers on a timely basis (regardless of when the FLC gets paid); (3) clearly indicate pay rates ahead of time; (4) make it easy for workers to keep track of what they are earning so that payday discrepancies can be resolved; (5) make work assignments clear; (6) provide safety training such as safe lifting and Worker Protection Standard (pesticide safety); (7) provide breaks, toilets and cold drinking water, as well as water, soap and paper towels for hand washing; (8) develop well-communicated reward and disciplinary processes; and (9) seek to continually improve supervision and interpersonal relations when dealing with crew workers.

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Many crew workers felt growers paid a little better than farm labor contractors.

Some of these recommendations are simply common sense, others are required by law. Perhaps the foremost challenge that remains is that of pay and benefits. After all, if an FLC is going to make a living, he or she must also receive a salary for the service contributed in recruiting and managing the workforce. FLCs who can provide technical expertise and supervision of such tasks as pruning, grafting, harvesting may obtain a higher wage for their efforts.

It is hard for an FLC who offers a good salary and benefit package, and complies with legal requirements to compete against those who follow a more casual approach — for example, paying "under the table", not paying taxes or not providing required training. The very nature of the legal structure does not help. Many laws extend essential benefits and protections to farm workers, but others simply add to the paperwork and stress of running a business, and enforcement is often inconsistent or nonexistent.

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