

Work/life balance key to attracting the next generation into dairying

Five ways to achieve a more sustainable workload

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Attracting new people (both successors and non-successors) to dairying is essential to enhance innovation in the sector and sustain rural communities. In a recent study, secondary school students believed that dairying offered equal opportunities for males and females. On a slightly less positive note, they perceived dairy farming to be a physically demanding job, with a poor work/life balance.

Improving labour efficiency is necessary to ensuring a good work-life balance and will benefit the farmer by creating more time to pursue other interests while demonstrating that dairy farming can provide a good lifestyle to prospective new entrants. Increased labour efficiency can be achieved without reducing performance while still maintaining enjoyable working conditions.

Firstly, to efficiently manage your labour input, it is important to measure the current situation before making any changes. There are many ways to achieve increased efficiency and some methods may be more applicable to your farm than others.

1 Know your hours worked annually and per week

Ask yourself the following: how much labour is required by the farm system? How many people are available to work? How much labour can be supplied? What is the financial cost of labour? To answer these questions, the labour input needs to be measured using the correct units to draw accurate conclusions.

To improve efficiency on an individual farm, the total labour demand on the farm and the number of hours worked per week are the two key things to measure. One approach is to

estimate the total labour demand (hr/year) and hours worked per week (hr/week) by recording the start and finish times of the work day and any significant non-work/break periods, on different weeks over the year, eg the first week of each calendar month. This figure should be examined on the individual farm to establish if it can be reduced.

2 Milking: Milking is the most time-consuming task on a dairy farm. Research has shown that highly efficient farms have a set evening milking time, often coinciding with the end of the working day. Average finishing time for these farms (evening milking and work) is 6pm which is comparable to other careers.

Having a set finishing time in the evening provides clarity around the length of the working day and forces better time management. Research shows no effect of 16-/8-hour milking interval (eg 7am and 3pm) on milk yield or SCC compared with a 12-/12-hour (eg 7am and 7pm) in herds averaging less than 6,000kg/cow.

Improving milking efficiency could increase throughput. A good milking technique and routine in the parlour is necessary to ensure that milking is time-efficient without negatively impacting milk quality and to prevent repetitive strain injuries. The Teagasc Best Practice in Milking course is designed to upskill farmers in milking techniques.

Short-term (three or four weeks) once-a-day (OAD) milking at the start of lactation can help offset a high labour demand. Once-a-day milking can result in lower income in that period but this may be outweighed by increased labour flexibility and overall reduced labour demand.

Other strategies for improving milking efficiency include optimising milking machine settings, increasing the number of milking units and improving cow flow. More details can

be found in the Teagasc *Dairy Farm Infrastructure Workbook*.

3 Calf rearing: In a seasonal calving system, calf care is the second most time consuming task after milking in early lactation. Labour demand can be reduced by feeding calves OAD from three weeks of age without having any negative effect on calf performance or health. If feeding milk OAD, calves still need to be checked carefully twice a day and fed concentrate at an alternative time to milk feeding.

Other options are to automate calf feeding as automatic milk feeders are more labour efficient than manual feeders and can save up to 1min 28sec per calf/day. For 50 calves, automatic feeders could save 1hr 15min per day on calf rearing. Other strategies to reduce labour input include group feeding calves, pumping milk to the calf shed instead of transporting it by hand, having the calf shed located close to the milking parlour and selling males calves at two weeks of age.

4 Using contractors: Many of the most labour-efficient farmers reduce the hours they work by outsourcing work. They either outsource a task completely (eg fencing) or simply use contractors at particularly busy times of the year (eg slurry and fertiliser spreading in spring). Strategic use of contractors, particularly during times of peak workload, reduces hours worked by the farmer allowing her or him and those working on the farm to focus on achieving a profitable and enjoyable business.

Outsourcing work is an ideal method for any farmer to reduce workload and a cost benefit analysis should be completed when considering how much machinery work to contract out. To maintain a successful relationship with your contractor good communication and paying on time are essential.



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5 Facilities: Facilities (milking, calf care, winter housing, fragmentation, grazing and roadway infrastructure) have a considerable impact on labour efficiency. Well-designed and maintained handling facilities are essential for the safe handling of animals and prevention of injury to handlers.

Long hours, poor working conditions and excessive physical work as a result of poor facilities have

been identified as barriers to finding and keeping good people and they also negatively impact on labour efficiency. In contrast, having good facilities and management practices can save time, money and make the farm a more attractive workplace for prospective employees.

The Teagasc *Dairy Farm Infrastructure Workbook* enables you to assess your own farm infrastructure and identify deficits.

Where to invest resources of time, money, effort/labour, materials, is always a challenge with the opportunity cost of investment complicating the decision.

A useful tool for categorising potential projects is the PICK model which is described in detail on page 230 of the Moorepark 2019 Open Day booklet which is available at www.teagasc.ie/publications/2019/moorepark19-open-day.php.