



Designing more attractive dairy farm workplaces

Labour shortages are having a major impact on dairy farming in Ireland. **TEAGASC** researchers are engaging with stakeholders to identify strategies to address this.

Inadequate availability of skilled farm labour has been identified as a major issue that is currently impacting the sustainability of dairy farming enterprises, and it is anticipated that this will worsen in the coming years. Attracting new and young people into the dairy industry is essential to achieve succession on farms, enhance innovation, and promote successful and profitable dairying (McKillop *et al.*, 2018). The shortage of skilled workers combined with an increased workload is contributing to a deteriorating work/life balance for many farmers. The growing economy in Ireland means that dairy farming is facing increased competition for employees from other industrial sectors. Contributing issues from the farm perspective include work organisation, farm facilities, and work practices. Although contributing factors have been identified, it is imperative to identify strategies to overcome the labour challenges facing the industry. One approach that was considered was to engage with key informants, record their views, and analyse the data.

Methodology

A mixed methods research approach was used to explore farm labour issues. This was achieved by conducting an in-depth focus group discussion (three hours), held on the day after the International Agricultural Workforce Conference (July 2018). There were 34 participants, including farmers (ten), industry organisation representatives (nine), advisors (six), educators (two) and researchers (seven: three national and four international). The group was randomly divided into smaller groups of five to seven people. Three open-ended questions relating to farm labour were developed and presented to the groups:

1. What are the current work/labour challenges on Irish dairy farms?
2. What do you anticipate as being the two main labour issues on Irish dairy farms in five to ten years?
3. What is working well on Irish dairy farms currently with respect to workload and employees, and why?

A range of participatory learning and action techniques such as flexible brainstorming, clustering of ideas, and direct ranking were used (de Brún *et al.*, 2017). The data collected were coded into themes and analysed.

Informants' views

What are the current work/labour challenges on Irish dairy farms?

Significant challenges to labour efficiency on dairy farms were identified:

- poor working environment (poor management of employees, low levels of training provided to employees, poor standard of facilities);
- seasonality of workload;
- poor perception of industry (long hours and low wages); and,
- low availability of skilled workers.

What do you anticipate as being the two main labour issues on Irish dairy farms in five to ten years?

The workshop participants considered that the future challenges facing the industry will be broadly similar to those challenges currently being faced by farmers, so new challenges are not envisaged, but the current challenges are seen to be very significant.



FIGURE 1: Key factors that are working well on farms regarding managing labour demand and providing a good working environment for employees. (Graphic reproduced courtesy of the Irish Farmers Journal.)

What is working well on Irish dairy farms currently with respect to workload and employees, and why?

A number of key factors that are currently being practised on farms, and working well in attracting and retaining employees, were identified (Figure 1).

Most of the points illustrated in Figure 1 of ‘what is working well’ on Irish dairy farms largely address the current challenges. The solutions are known, but the challenge now is how to take action and implement them.

The shortage of skilled workers combined with an increased workload is contributing to a deteriorating work/life balance for many farmers.

Conclusion

Farming can be a very enjoyable and rewarding career, as indicated by the responses gathered from the informants. There are, however, challenges that need to be addressed to ensure its long-term sustainability:

1. The high level of labour demand on farms may be compounded for both the farmer and employee by the seasonality of the milk production system, and facilities and practices conducted on the farm. Changes in employee management, shorter hours, better wages, and provision of training could increase the availability of skilled labour.
2. The labour demand/availability challenges are likely to continue in the long term and therefore need to be addressed.
3. A range of mechanisms was identified as working well on farms in

addressing the challenges. Thus, the new advanced challenge is to develop a strategy to implement these mechanisms. A multi-actor approach may be required, and the People in Dairy Action Plan will be essential in realising this.

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References

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