

Getting to grips with labour challenges on dairy farms

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Introduction

Labour input on farms is a key aspect of social sustainability, as on the one hand, it represents a significant portion of the life of the persons involved, and on the other, the production of the primary products (e.g. milk), could not progress in the absence of labour input. A core strength of the Irish dairy industry is the role and input of the family in the operation of the dairy farm. The success of family farms is highly dependent on the efficient use of labour input. However, recent trends have indicated a decreasing family workforce and an increasing reliance on hired workers.

Availability of workers for dairy farms

The availability of workers has declined due to the perception of long working hours, precarious working conditions, and low wages, in addition to other factors such as high availability of alternative employment. The lack of workers is compounded by the seasonal workload, where labour demand peaks in spring/ summer, coinciding with calving and breeding. There is a growing appreciation of the resulting issues that can arise, e.g. stress, mental health issues and difficulties for farmers in maintaining an adequate quality of life. This in turn can detract people from a career in farming, leading to further challenges. The challenges of an increased farm workload, attracting and retaining workers and ensuring an adequate quality of life for the farm family needs to be addressed, while ensuring that dairy farms are also profitable and environmentally sustainable.

Potential responses to by dairy farmers

- Improving labour efficiency by 7 hours/ cow per year (30 hours / cow per year to 23 hours/cow per year) on a farm with 120 cows has the potential to reduce labour demand by 840 hours.
- There is a wide variety of work practices and technologies available to farmers to reduce labour demand, while some require capital expenditure, others may not and are focused on improved work organisation, so should be relatively easy to implement.
- Farms with a structured work organisation pattern had a lower labour demand requiring less hours of work per cow/ year as well as shorter workdays and earlier finishing times compared with farm with no structured work organisation pattern (figure 1).
- Better work organisation also leads to improved working conditions for staff due to better role clarity, a more structured start and finishing time, and better opportunities to identify work efficiency gains.

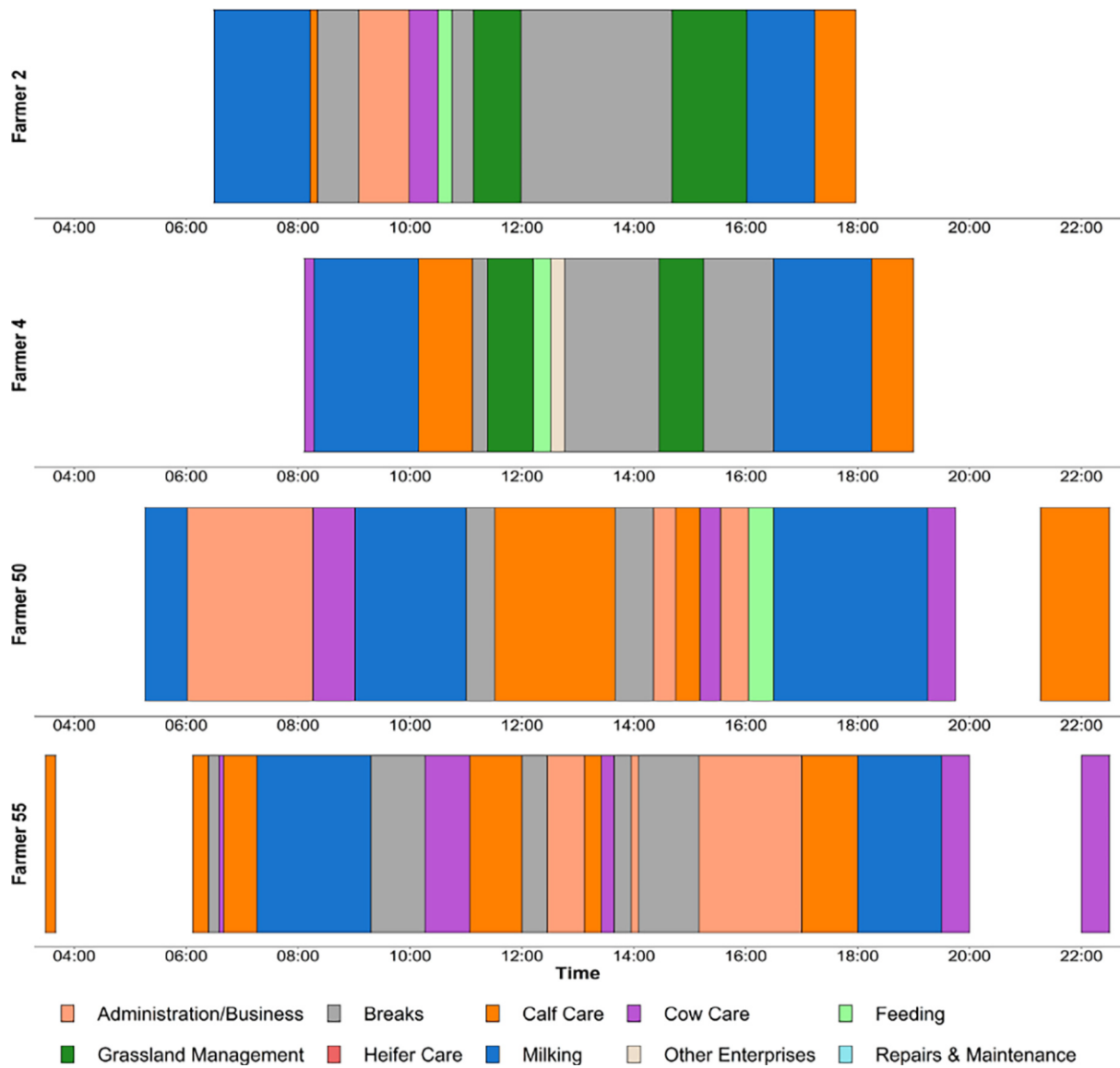


Figure 1. Daily task timelines of two farmers with a structured work organisation pattern (Farmers 2 and 4) and two farmers (Farmers 50 and 55) with an unstructured work organisation pattern in March

Conclusion

The shortage of labour and skills is a major challenge faced not only by the Irish dairy industry but also by other agro-food sectors in many countries. This challenge is compounded by a reputational problem based on outdated perceptions of the work, education and skills requirement, and its lack of attractiveness as a long-term career. Farm employers have a key role in addressing the issue by making the employment more attractive by enhancing working conditions.