

dairying

Lessons in attracting and retaining people

Flexible hours and good working conditions are key to attracting and retaining staff.

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Labour availability is a big talking point among dairy farmer employers and has been for several years. A significant proportion of dairy farms have now moved beyond the owner-operator model due to increased scale, and family labour in many cases is not sufficient to fill the gaps.

Finding and retaining good staff is a key challenge to sustainable dairy farm development. The focus must be on what we can do to attract people to work on dairy farms. With this in mind, it's important to look outside of agriculture and see what other businesses are doing to meet this challenge.

Eugene and Dymphna Sharkey run a convenience store retail business in Tuam, Co Galway. Similar to dairy farming, the business operates on a seven days a week, 52 weeks a year basis. Early starts are a feature of each day. To meet labour demand, the Sharkeys employ six people full-time plus part-time staff. "We have been in business since 2011 and finding staff has always been a challenge," says Eugene.

"Over the years, we have learned that flexible working hours, pay, giving responsibility and a good working environment are the four big factors to recruiting and retaining staff."

He added: "We do our best to work around peoples' commitments outside of the job. We facilitate a wide

range of working hours. The business is open from 7am to 11pm. We have staff that work from 6am to 2pm, 10am to 6pm and 3pm to 11pm etc.

"By having this menu of hours, we widen the pool of potential people to work in the business. We offer a mixture of hours for both full-time and part-time people.

"We use a WhatsApp group and if anyone needs to change hours, we find that WhatsApp is the easiest way to make that change.

"We have some students who play sports. They tell us their fixtures in advance and we work around them. It's the same for students in college. They send us their timetable and we work around this when scheduling their working hours.

"We know our busy times by season and day at this stage. Therefore, we adjust the rota to add an extra hour here and there when needs be. We are trying to get the balance right where there is just enough work and people aren't stressed or idle too much either."

The couple says that pay is important, to a point, and they have reviewed staff rates, particularly with the cost of living increasing. "We feel it's important to acknowledge this," says Dymphna.

"Sometimes the emphasis can be all on pay, but we find that pay alone will not give you good staff retention."

Continuing, she said: "It's a family-run business and having a good working environment is important to us. Small things like making staff a cup of coffee in the morning and small tokens here and there we feel is



important to show our appreciation."

"Giving responsibility is something that we are working on. It is easier now that we are established, but we are definitely delegating more and taking more regular time away from the business. We have worked hard and set up a good business with good structure and standards and now are in a position to delegate more.

"We get the big jobs like stocktaking, ordering, analysing reports, pricing and staff rotas done during the week and this means that the basics only need to be done at the weekend. This works well for us to take some time off at the weekends and also means less pressure for staff."

Can these lessons be implemented on dairy farms?

Fergal Keane from Moveen, Kilkee, Co Clare, works on the dairy farm of PJ, Carmel and Kevin Murray. After completing the dairy diploma course at Pallaskenry Agriculture College in May 2019, Fergal started working with the Murray family.

"Last year, I worked full-time with the Murrays in spring and then it was mainly milking for the rest of the year. If they needed a hand with vaccinating or moving stock, I would do a few extra hours.

"I am helping with the suckler farm at home, so flexibility is important to me. If I need to go home to calve a cow in spring, there is no issue. We discuss the week ahead and if they need extra help outside of milking, I know a week in advance so I can plan this around the jobs at home.

"If I was working in a nine to five job, I wouldn't have that flexibility to help out with the farm at home during the day."



Eugene and Dymphna Sharkey. \Ray Ryan

Fergal says location is important too. "I am a neighbour of the Murrys, so there is no time taken up travelling to work. I wouldn't mind a 30-40 minute drive, but after that, the travelling time would add up and this would leave less time for the farm at home.

"The facilities are good here, which

is definitely a help with nine rows of cow per milking. This means I don't spend too long milking.

"Milking starts at 7.30 in the morning and there is flexibility here with the evening milking time. If I need to finish up earlier, there is no issue with bringing the cows in that bit earlier.

"Right now, this employment is working well for me. I know I am guaranteed enough milkings to give me a wage, plus some additional hours now and again if I want them.

This arrangement gives me a wage and time to develop the farm at home. I am also learning and each week I learn something new on this farm."

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Research* has found eight main criteria that employees want from employment.

1 Flexible work hours

Dairy farmers can offer a greater range of flexible working hours for their employees. This is not always ideal for employers, but to find and keep quality employees, farmers are finding ways to make this work.

2 Limited weekend hours

Some farms are now offering full-time employees every weekend to every second or third weekend off. Part-time employees can play a major role in getting the milking done at the weekend. Aim to have all the bigger jobs done during the week so that the weekend work is mainly milking.

3 Higher than average pay

Farms, like any other business, are giving pay increases for full-time employees who are an asset to the business. Ask yourself - is this person worth an extra Euro per hour? Also, for employees who carry out milking on

dairy farms, the pay per hour can be well above the average pay.

This makes milking very attractive, especially for part-time employees where weekend work suits best.

4 Varied work

Farmers delegating responsibility can give employees job satisfaction and confidence. Delegating responsibility should be given in small amounts at first.

5 Training and development opportunities

Having employees shadow the employer for the first week is key to giving them the right start. Begin by delegating small tasks and build on this over time. Even if the employee has milked before, they still need training, as they have never milked in your parlour before.

6 Feedback and appreciation

A simple thank you and acknowledgement of a job well done, and even an outing at Christmas time is all

that's required. Seeking feedback is something that is not too common on dairy farms. Employees need to be asked for feedback and maybe asked a few times in order for them to feel comfortable.

7 Career development and mentoring

Knowing your employee, and making it your priority to find out what their ambitions are, is very important for staff retention.

8 Enjoyable environment/good facilities

Some of the improvements may be adding in more gates to separate animals, a manual drafting facility, or more lighting around the yard. Having an ideas form filled up every four months can work well where it is standard to give honest feedback. It's up to the employer to question the ideas and prioritise what gets done and when.

**Nettle et al. (2011)*

Summary

Many similarities can be drawn between Sharkeys' retail business and a dairy farm when it comes to working conditions. The tradition of working six days per week as an employee on a dairy farm has changed over the last few years.

The Murray farm is an example of where offering a set number of milkings

plus some additional hours, if required, is working well for their employee Fergal, who wants time to do other things during the day. Every second or third weekend off is also becoming more common. The Murray farm shows us that dairy farms can offer flexible working hours to attract and widen the pool of potential employees.

Similar to the Sharkey business, farm-

ers are creating their own workforce strategies and finding that employees are developing skills appropriate to run the business.

In turn, this means farm owners can take more regular time away from the farm with confidence that the farm runs more smoothly and employees develop ownership and commitment to the performance of the farm.