



How to combine efficiency and pleasure in your work on a dairy farm

In December 2011 the Flemish pilot farmers discussed the aspect of labour on the dairy farm. The size of the farms, the number of cows and the resulting workload keeps increasing, while labour in Flanders is still very much family oriented. Our pilot farmers are, like many others, interested in sustainable growth, and are looking to increase production to ensure a good livelihood, but without increasing labour demand, as this is often already quite high. Jelle Zijlstra (Wageningen UR Livestock Research) was invited as an expert to assist the Flemish dairy farmers on their way to a more efficient labour organisation.

What are the bottlenecks on the farm?

While one dairy farmer is considering an investment to reduce the labour demand, another is more concerned with optimal time management and a good work organisation. To find out what where the main questions from the Flemish farmers, each participant was asked to list his/her priorities based on a strategic checklist. Time management and optimal work organisation were identified as absolute top priorities, but also choosing between own or hired labour, and choosing between automation or external labour were identified as relevant topics. Also, some mentioned the importance of harmonizing labour supply and demand, but rarely as a top priority. However, this seems to be a crucial aspect in evaluating the labour situation on the farm. For instance, on a farm with two generations it is necessary to consider whether there is in fact a full time job for father/mother/son/daughter, or if the work can be combined with for instance a part-time job off the farm. Staff or personnel management was not considered a priority by the Flemish farmers, considering the strong family-oriented character of the dairy sector. However, even in the case of a farm with only family labour, there should be given some attention to this aspect. Working with husbands, wives, children or parents is not always easy, so good agreements, an open communication and a timely evaluation form the basis for a smooth organisation.

How KISS is your farm?

Based on a number of simple yes or no questions, the KISS (Keep it Simple and Safe) checklist assesses what changes can be implemented to reduce the workload and optimize farm results. These adjustments can range from an improved self-organisation to optimizing cow management or investing in automation. In this aspect it is important for a good farm manager and entrepreneur to take some time for self-reflection, to find own strengths and weaknesses, and identify improvement paths. The participants were urged to actively tackle one or two aspects that can optimize their farm management, and these can be relatively simple measures. For instance, hoof care is considered an unpleasant job by most farmers. However, by postponing this, it can possibly result in an increase in hoof problems and lameness, and an increased workload.

Labour organisation on the farm

To improve labour organisation on the farm, an overview of possible management tools was presented. These tools can be very simple and useable on any farm, e.g. a list for information sharing in the stables. Others are more suited for large farms with several employees, e.g. a staff manual. A

tool that interested most of our farmers where the so-called 'working lists'. These combine several tasks that can be done in the same location or by the same person. By writing this down and making this a standard way of working such a list can contribute to a more efficient way of working.

These different tools all have a common goal, i.e. bringing peace of mind to the farmer. Unforeseen circumstances will always occur, but when the everyday tasks are well organized and planned it's easier to handle any eventuality, without compromising the general work organisation.

Before the meeting, farmers were asked to register time spent on the different tasks on the farms (crops, feeding, ...), and some time was spent comparing and discussing their personal results. Milk produced (kg) per hour labour invested ranged between 152 and 392. More interesting than these numbers, however, were the reasons and explanations for this difference. In the following discussion, farmers elaborated on working methods on their farms, and were interested in hearing how others handled certain jobs. All participants were very eager to exchange knowledge and experiences, and possibly try some new things on their farm. The overall conclusion was that the larger farms generally produce more efficiently, and that the milking installation used was the main determinant for the milk produced per hour labour. The dairy farmer with the most efficient production in the group was an organic dairy farmer who milks a little over a 100 cows with 2 robots.

Man or machine?

The Flemish dairy farmers love to do everything themselves. They are not very keen on hired labour, for two main reasons, i.e. the cost and availability of hired labour. Concerning the first issue, it was stated that if the cost of an investment per year and per hour labour saved is below the cost of hired labour, the investment can pay off. If not hired labour may be the better choice. This was illustrated with the example of purchasing an extra mowing machine compared to hiring a person for doing the job. The discussion that followed showed that farmers not always make an assessment of the costs of hired labour vs. investment in automation, and that they often just assume that hired labour is more expensive. Concerning the latter issue, this seems to be a question of supply and demand. Up until now, we don't have the tradition in Flemish dairy farming to make use of hired labour. However, if the demand would go up, this could be an opportunity for some of the two-generation farms, where there may in fact be a too high labour supply for the work that has to be done.

Conclusion

Taking on the labour organisation on the farm can be a positive and pro-active approach, but can also be the result of a negative situation, e.g. disappointing technical or economic results. The goal is to always stay in the first situation, and be in control of the farm. In this way, problems are tackled before they manifest themselves, and this contributes to an enjoyable working environment and a sustainable farm.

Finally, farmers received the following advice: 'Organise and choose, even in the case of hard decisions. Let a planned, well-aimed ambition guide your work, and don't rely on casual opportunities. Don't let anything 'just happen' to you, but always keep control over the work. This will give you more peace of mind and more pleasure in your day-to-day work.'

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