

Benchmarking effective farm work organisation

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Summary

- Farms with effective work organisation were labour efficient with low farmer work hours.
- This study identified work organisation strategies effective in improving work life balance on the farm, including having set and earlier finish times and reducing the number of tasks being completed during the day.

Introduction

Work organisation is well recognised as a key element underpinning any business, with important consequences for productivity, innovation, working conditions and worker well-being. Thus, it was considered that a focus on work organisation on-farm could assist in mitigating against the negative consequences of the relatively large workload during the spring/summer period.

Effective work organisation

A sample of 55 spring-calving dairy farms with labour input data available for the spring and summer period were examined. Studying work organisation in other industries and within agriculture allowed us to identify three key characteristics or measures of work organisation: efficiency and productivity, flexibility and standardisation. Work efficiency and productivity are key characteristics of any work system, focusing on maximising the output from inputted labour without negatively affecting work quality. Flexibility is important in terms of achieving a balance between work and personal life. This can be challenging on farms due to the repetitive nature of tasks such as milking and calf care; the consequent effects of which mean farmers often work seven days per week. Standardisation refers to the sequence and structure of tasks to ensure high standards of work and productivity. Each of these measures was interpreted within the context of the on-farm labour time-use study:

- Efficiency and productivity was associated with farm hours worked per cow and farmer hours worked per day;
- Flexibility was described by the length of the farmers' working day and the number of days off for the farmer between the start of calving and end of breeding;
- Standardisation was expressed as the number of different tasks completed by the farmer per day and the finish time of the farmer.

Work benchmarks

All 55 farms were ranked for work organisation effectiveness and Table 1 presents results for the top and bottom 25% of farms. The top 25% of farms for work organisation effectiveness had better labour efficiency, lower labour input, shorter work days and earlier finishing times than the bottom 25% of farms. Some of the savings in hours worked were likely due to those farms having labour-saving facilities, technologies and work practices as well as effective work organisation.

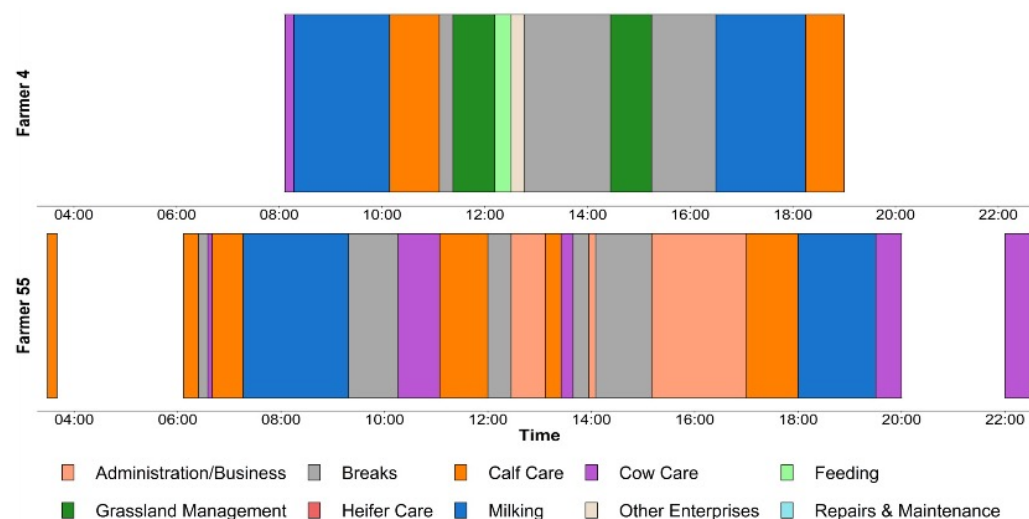
Table 1. Characteristics of farms (n=55) ranked in the top and bottom 25% for work organisation effectiveness

Item	Work organisation effectiveness	
	Top 25%	Bottom 25%
Average herd size	112	113
Labour efficiency (h/cow)	17.4	20.9
Labour input per week (h/week)	51.2	70
Farmer length of working day (h)	11.4	13.2
Farmer days off between start of calving and end of breeding	2	1
Number of tasks completed by the farmer per day	9.6	12.5
Farmer finish time	18:25	19:58

The data generated allowed us to identify patterns of effective organisation which we can describe as ‘the ideal working day’. ‘The ideal working day’ was characterised by:

- Later start and earlier finish times (than the average farm)
- More free time in the evening through earlier and fixed finish times
- Fewer different tasks completed during the day
- Longer non-farm activity time during the working day

Examples of this work day pattern during March are presented in Figure 1; illustrating an example of an ‘ideal working day’ (Farmer 4) and a farmer with ineffective work organisation (Farmer 55).

**Figure 1.** Daily task timelines of example working day patterns of farmers in the most (Farmer 4) and least (Farmer 55) effective work organisation quartiles during March

Conclusion

Improvements in work organisation can have positive outcomes for job satisfaction and optimise business performance, particularly through improved labour productivity and efficiency. The positive situations observed in this study highlight what can be achieved on farms in terms of workload and flexibility.