

dairying

Part-time employment on dairy farms – making it work for both parties



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The average dairy herd has grown from 45 cows in 2014 to just over 80 in 2019. Still modest when compared with the UK, New Zealand, Australia and the Netherlands, but nonetheless, an additional 6,500 new full-time equivalent staff will be needed to work on our dairy farms over the next 10 years.

More trained full-time farm managers are certainly needed, but there is also a significant amount of work that could be completed by competent part-time staff. Given their skills, background and proximity, drystock farmers might wish to take on this work.

We recently interviewed a number of drystock farmers about this topic and got some interesting answers.

What is preventing drystock farmers taking up work on dairy farms?

Four areas kept coming up in answer to this question: wages, long hours and working conditions, other employment opportunities and the age of the drystock farmer.

Wages

- “The first reason is money. Who wants to work for minimum wage? Milking cows for two or three hours flat out is a hard enough job that requires a level of skill. You can work in a shop putting cans on shelves, that’s a lot easier.”
- “In some places, you go in to do the milking and that’s what you’re getting paid for. Then, all of a sudden, he wants you to feed calves or do other jobs. But you’re not paid to do it.”
- “I’ve no issue working some week-end hours, but it needs to be reflected in the wages.”



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What changes should dairy farmers make to encourage part-time farmers to take up employment?

A number of principal themes were identified including:

- Attitude and expectations.
- Time management.
- Facilities.

On hours and working conditions

- “I see jobs advertised where dairy farmers want lads for calving during February or March. Who is going to turn up for a month’s work and have nothing then after?”
- “If you’re on a building site, there are more employees, so there is a more even spread of the workload and a bit of craic. On a dairy farm, it may just be the farmer and the employee, which can be a bit intimidating for the employee.”
- “There is a farmer up the road and he’s offering lads small money to milk 350 cows in a 24-unit parlour. That’s double the recommended rate.”

On other employment opportunities

- “My job in the factory is permanent. I know my hours every week and it’s as simple as that.”
- “Around here there is plenty of work. Easier work, with better hours and you wouldn’t be worked as hard. I have a young lad here in college and any day off he’s at the buildings or landscaping.”
- “A lot of drystock lads go away and serve their time in an apprenticeship, because they won’t survive on farming alone. I think this eliminates a lot of part-time farmers. They have a good work skill. It would take a lot to convince them to work on a dairy farm six days a week.”

On the age of drystock farmers

- “It’s a young man’s game working on a dairy farm. Dairy farmers are always running and racing.”
- “I suppose I wouldn’t mind feeding the calves in spring or herding stock. But the dairy men will want you milking and calving, which wouldn’t suit older lads.”
- “If I was 30 years younger I’d be milking cows. There is no money in dry cattle.”

On dairy farmers’ attitudes and expectations

- “Some dairy farmers have an attitude that would turn you off working with them. They won’t want to hear this, but it’s the truth! Nobody owes them a labour solution.”



Regular effective communication is at the core of staff management.

- “Often dairy farmers have never worked for anyone else and they don’t understand what it’s like to be an employee. They need to understand rosters, training and job descriptions and put these in place. It happens in other workplaces, so why not on dairy farms?”
- “There are plenty of people who might be happy to do certain jobs like fertilizer, others who might prefer a few milkings a week or whatever. But a lot of dairy farmers want somebody who can do everything on day 1. They have to be more flexible with people”

On time management

- “Clear hours of work, and getting paid for those hours, is number one. I understand there are busy times in the year, but if, on most days, employees were gone before 6pm, then more drystock lads might look at it.”
- “If dairy farmers are serious about having people working, the work has to be offered around the calendar, not just for a few crazy weeks in spring.”

On facilities

- “If you want people to milk for you on a regular basis, you need good facilities, it’s as simple as that. It is much easier to get relief milkers for eight rows of cows than for 15.”
- “As a part time farmer, I enjoy working with stock. If the housing and handling facilities are good then work like dosing and calf rearing is enjoyable. I have enough drudgery at

home without volunteering for it in someone else’s place.”

- “Having a canteen, changing room and toilet facility is not too much to ask.”
- “Dairy farms are busy places, so well-maintained yards and machinery are vital. I have a couple of young lads mad into farming, but there are some local farmers I wouldn’t let them take part time jobs with, it’s just too risky.”

Elements of success

The main themes identified were quite consistent across drystock farmers, regardless of age, location and whether or not they had previous experience on dairy farms. It is important that such issues are addressed by prospective employers; results from this project will be used to help develop better guidelines in this regard. We also interviewed some people (both dairy and drystock farmers) who have been involved in successful long-standing work arrangements. Some key elements of success they outlined were. The objective here was to highlight the characteristics of that make these a success for both parties. Some key elements mentioned were:

Employee observations

- “People say the hours are long, but in another way, a good dairy farm is great for getting part-time work. I would do about four or five milkings



The Teagasc Farm Labour Manual is available from Teagasc offices.

a week which is a good extra income stream. It’s better than working in a bar until all hours on the weekend.”

- “As farmers, we might think such-and-such locally is a good farmer, but they might not be great to work for. The range among dairy farmers is huge and working for a good operator makes all the difference for the worker.”
- “I took a job on a dairy farm to cut out commuting and give me more time at home. Four days a week leaving time to also run the home farm. That’s what I asked for and the dairy farmer works around it with extra relief work.”

Employers’ observations

- “New workers don’t have to know everything, but a big thing is that they bring a willingness to listen and learn. It is then up to me to train them correctly. We are all busy, but don’t expect too much from the start.”
- “Staff turnover is a fact of life, but if people are leaving because of bad management, then it’s doubly bad. Do the basics well, like having a fixed quitting time, roster days well in advance, have a good work plan set out and, above all, pay on time.”
- “If a good person is eager to learn new skills on the job, then try to provide opportunities of interest to them.”
- “Reliability is everything in employees, but being fair and reasonable is a must for us as employers. If someone is making a good honest effort but you are on their case for the sake of it, that isn’t going to last.”