

## **Workshop Questions – July 2014**

### **Responses from dairy farmers attending workshop**

1. What skills do you need to be an employer?
2. What do you think your employee will expect?
3. What level of communication (type and time) is required?
4. What reports will you require from employee?
5. Rosters – how can they be prepared and agreement reached?
6. How can you be organised and still allow for job flexibility?
7. What to include in a job description, what are you looking for?
8. Employee training – what might be needed?
9. What are the risks of employing labour and how can they be minimised?
10. What are your concerns about employing staff and how can they be overcome?
11. What are the alternatives to not employing a full time unit?

## 1. What skills do you need to be an employer?

- **Communication:** Listening skills and clear writing is necessary
- **Financial:** Farm business must be viable to be able to pay employees even during periods of low milk price. Therefore good technical knowledge is essential to keep farm financially viable.
- **Administration:** Record keeping and paper work will increase when labour is employed, there needs to be appropriate systems/templates put in place
- **Vision:** There must be an overall vision and plan for the farm which incorporates the role of employed labour
- **People management skills:** These are often called soft skills, which are more difficult to quantify e.g. motivation, empathy, touchy/ feely stuff. Farmer must be a time manager so employees are rostered correctly. Farmer must also be a trainer and adaptable with labour
- **Employment law:** knowledge of legal obligation and requirements of employing labour.
- **Patience:** To realise that it takes time for an employee to adapt to a new workplace or new practices
- **Team player:** This will involve the team (farmer/employee(s), family) negotiating, delegating, setting goals, measuring performance, agreeing rosters, planning etc. Farmer must realise that they are part of that team.
- **Farm Image:** Once your system is labour dependant, you must be able to attract good employees and retain good people (for a reasonable period of time).
- **Motivation skills:** Farmer must have the skills to give respect, delegate where appropriate, give recognition (monetary/other)

This is a huge number of skills! What skills have you got? What do you need? All these skills don't have to be all within the one person. What skills could you 'contract out' to somebody else? Certainly some of the areas mentioned could be contracted out.

## 2. What do you think your employee will expect?

- **Wages:** Clarity from the start, paid regularly and on time.
- **Safe workplace:** Employee will not expect to carry out jobs which could cause injury. A Health and safety statement is essential.
- **Respect:** This is essential for both the employee and employer. To be treated fairly as you would expect to be treated by an employer (could be difficult if you have never worked as an employee)
- **Opportunities:** Employee will expect some opportunities/incentives to potentially develop while in employment. These don't necessarily have to be financial.
- **Good atmosphere:** There should be a good way of working on the farm. The employer is expected to be well organised.
- **Clarity:** From the start of employment. Proper job description or terms and conditions (both conditions of contract and working/environmental conditions)
- **Consistency:** Each day the main tasks are consistent e.g. milking times, feeding
- **Holidays:** Holidays and days off agreed at an early stage. Have a plan in place if either employee or employer is suddenly unavailable e.g. illness, funeral
- **Good working environment and facilities:** Provision for having tea, lunch, toilets, cleaning up.
- **Advance notice:** Of changes that are occurring on the farm.
- **Trust:** Employer to trust employee and pass over ownership for certain tasks giving the employee responsibility.

## 3. What level of communication (type and time) is required?

Need to understand and check how you employees prefer to receive information. It is hard to quantify time involved here – will depend on the employee. Communication is always changing – will depend on the individual and the task. Suggestions include

- **Daily**
  - Go through a to-do list
  - Verbal/oral
  - Listen more, speak less each day
  - Give feedback (as required)
- **Weekly**
  - Does not necessarily require a formal meeting
  - Prioritize work, put someone responsible to carry out tasks
  - List jobs for everyone including owner (transparency)
  - Give feedback (as required)
  - Coaching where required
  - Check understanding – if employee is not understanding – cannot act; if employee is misunderstanding – acts incorrectly/ inappropriately
  - Demonstration of jobs/tasks where required

- **bi-annually**
  - Follow up review
  - To plan holidays, work during busy periods
  - More open to input from others, put time aside to discuss relevant issues (as competency increases, let them take on more)
- **Text messaging**
  - e.g. forward on Co-op reports (P%, F%, SCC etc.) – check afterwards if message was understood.
  - Need to send the good texts as well as the bad ones.
  - Text message keeps a record.
- **Written instruction (clearly defined and keep simple)**
  - manuals for operating equipment
  - Protocols for processes.
  - Diagrams – visual, audio, kinaesthetic

#### **4. What reports will you require from employee?**

Put in place a reporting structure from the start of employment. The owner sets the culture/ tone for the business and reporting becomes just part of the job. All employees are expected to report to work on time. Some suggested reports include

- **Verbal**
  - Report urgent issues immediately eg mistakes/ breakages – ‘a stitch in time’ – must get away from culture of blame. Report accidents/ close encounters/ unusual occurrences that are potential health and safety issues.
  - Day-to-day running of the farm
- **Written**
  - Written on notice board e.g. jobs completed, problems to be solved
  - Hours worked (log0
  - Log book/ diary – make sure that the person responsible is clearly identified
- **Detailed reports**
  - Set up clearly defined way of communicating detailed reports, eg notice board, on-line
  - Seasonal – calvings, inseminations, fertility reports, performance reports
  - Weekly -milk yield, grass growth, grass cover, etc
  - Employer may be the person providing these detailed reports

## 5. Rosters – how can they be prepared and agreement reached?

- **Agreed at start of employment:** There is initial responsibility on farmer to decide what he/she needs. Clarify that work hours will be longer in busy periods but that this will be balanced out later in the year. Planning and communication at the outset is key, then there will be no major surprises later when workload changes.
- **Time off:** Identify employee expectations in terms of time off. Dedicate some/ all of the holidays for quieter times of the year – busy times of the year are 'protected'
- **Annual staff planner** – set out at start of the year, review on a monthly basis. Make it visual – on the wall. Have it colour coded – shows respect that employer understands best way to communicate to the employee. Highlight busy periods in red, public holidays in a different colour. Break it down to a weekly/ monthly basis. Ensure everybody knows who is on/ off for weekend duty – to facilitate 'swapping'. Have workload evenly divided amongst employees. Make it clear so everyone knows who's expected in.
- **Replacement:** Place responsibility on employee to find replacements when they can't make it (if possible) to work. Give responsibility to arrange a substitute (they have plenty of notice).

## 6. How can you be organised and still allow for job flexibility?

- **System:** Have simple systems and processes in place.
- **Time off:** Allow time off when not busy and expect employee to cover when it is busy, give time off if work is completed to correct standard sooner than expected.
- **'Back up' team:** Have a 'back up' team that you can call on in an 'emergency' or at short notice. These could be family members. Have list of contractors and farm relief services (FRS) for most of tasks on the farm, even if you or your employees are normally doing these tasks.
- **Contingency plan** The more contingency plans you have in place, the more flexible you can be. Have a plan for unexpected events e.g. milker absent, bad weather, animal health problem, etc.
- **Prioritisation** – Each week decide on what's important and what's urgent. Make sure all the urgent jobs get done.
- **Staff:** It may suit to have more part-time/ temporary staff rather than full time staff to give flexibility. Have enough staff to ensure that not everybody is to 'the pin of their collar'
- **Paradox** – the more structured you are, the more flexible you can be.
- **Operating Manuals:** Keep them simple, laminated and visible.

## 7. What to include in a job description, what are you looking for?

### What to include in job description

- Title to make the job attractive.
- Salary plus terms and conditions
- Hours involved
- Type of work and approximate day to day expectancies
- Level responsibility
- Who to report to?
- Probation of 6 months
- Opportunity to train and develop
- Clarity and security for the farm/ farmer.
- Accommodation supplied / or not (mention if you have it)

### What are you looking for

- Honest and good attitude
- Willingness to learn and work as a team
- No bad habits
- Initiative
- Flexible
- Good English essential
- Suitably qualified/ experience – but what qualifications – graduate of Dairy Herd Management course (but you mightn't be able to pay the going rate for this person). Qualification not always most important trait
- Attractive remuneration package for a suitable applicant
- An interview is the least effective means of selecting the correct candidate – a situational interview is a lot better e.g. come and milk with me some evening next week
- Find out where good people come from
- Job description is a live document – continuous change – you have got to respond to that.

## 8. Employee training – what might be needed?

It depends on level of experience. Employees could be trained by manager or someone qualified to give instruction. Or it could be a mixture of on-the job/ internal and external training required.

- **Health and safety training**
- **Manual handling**
- **Continued education:**– e.g. joining discussion groups. Employees should be brought to discussion group meetings. Allow employees to attend discussion group/ training courses/ events.
- **Milking Skills:** Training course (external) plus also training on-farm.
- **Management decisions.** Employees should be involved in eg grassland, breeding.
- **Newspaper:** Purchase Journal for employee each week.
- **Mentoring:** Employer has to be prepared to coach the employee and allow time for coaching.
- **Patience:** Give the employee time and review expectations.

## 9. What are the risks of employing labour and how can they be minimised?

Humans are a risk; it is all a risk...but you won't be able to milk more cows otherwise...there is a certain trade-off involved

- **Incompetence** – check references for previous employment, interview potential employees on farm with practical questions and scenarios.
- **Non-compliance with legislation** – ensure that farm meets standards such as health & safety, payslips, holidays, working week time etc. Have a knowledge of the legislation in advance of employing labour.
- **Accidents/ claims** – Have an up to date health and safety statement and adequate insurance
- **Aggressive employee/ wrong fit** - Have a contract, include probationary period.
- **Losing staff:** Have good conditions to help retain employees. If you hire the right person, you have to manage them properly (motivate).
- **Being able to afford them** – have a full financial plan for your farm which includes labour charge
- **Having enough work** – start with part time employee initially or consider sharing with another farmer

## 10. What are your concerns about employing staff and how can they be overcome?

- **Getting a capable person** – decide on exactly what you want someone for, get references, get help to recruit, templates
- **Our rights v their rights** – Get familiar with the legislation around employing labour
- **That you can trust them** - Run a simple system so that somebody else can do it instead on you
- **Can the business afford it?** Make sure you have a profitable business first
- **That I will be a 'good boss', getting it wrong, getting on with the employee** – These concerns will be all new to you, up skill yourself on legislation, communication and looking at farm from their perspective
- **Not having enough work.** Share worker between two farms. Fluctuate hours over the year.

## 11. What are the alternatives to not employing a full time labour unit?

- **Contractors:** Use contractors for all tasks, silage, slurry, fertiliser, reseeding, silage feeding, heat detection, AI etc.
- **Look at your own labour efficiency:** This may involve changing management systems e.g. OAD, number of enterprises, calving season, calf rearing system etc.
- **Increased mechanisation and infrastructure:** e.g. automated feeding, milking parlour additions. There will be a capital investment requirement for this approach
- **Sharer worker:** Two farmers sharing one farm share workers
- **Contract rearing of stock:** eg heifers, dry cows
- **Scale back:** Reduce livestock numbers, especially if overstocked
- **Farm relief service:** Use for relief milking
- **Student labour:** During busy periods
- **Collaborative farming:** Consider Partnerships, Share farming etc.