

Discussing Dr Nollaig Heffernan's Discounted planner

The discounted time approach to effective planning

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It is common thinking on farms to work until the job is done. This is a cumulative or adding up approach to time which is often inefficient and stress inducing. It also leads to the long workdays which threaten the dairy sector's image as a desirable place to work. A more productive mindset is to think about getting the work done in the time allowed. This mindset can be achieved by using a discounted time approach to planning, where you work backwards from a bigger picture.

- While most businesses have a five-year plan, you should at least be thinking a year out from where you are and using a yearly wall planner is ideal for this.
- Colour-coding the planner helps to visualise time consumption on farm.
- Time can then be broken down (yearly/planner → monthly/calendar → weekly/diary → daily/to-do list) to enable proactive intervention,
- Placing the colour-coded planner in a common area where it can be viewed, discussed and modified turns it into a powerful communication and time management.

TOP TIP: Time management and planning as learnable skillsets are multi-billion-dollar industries with plenty of references and resources available, ranging from phone apps to formally delivered courses.

COMPLETING YOUR PLANNER

- Ideally this exercise is started no later than December or in the equivalent final month of the business year by the employer/unit manager so information can be locked in before the calendar is given to staff at the beginning of the new year.
- By planning the year so clearly in advance, there is universal certainty about what needs to be done.
- This is common practice in other industries and as dairy is competing with other industries for access to the employment pool it is a practice that should be readily adopted by the dairy sector.

TAKING A BLANK YEARLY PLANNER...



NB! Colour-coding is quicker than reading written entries and reveals patterns and conflicts at a glance:

- keep in mind some people may prefer shading/patterns/stickers to colour-coding → ask the people in your business what they prefer
- remember to keep a key of what the colours/patterns/stickers represent.

1. Discount the time not available to farming



→ Discounted time can take several forms:

- protected-time-off might include holidays, red-letter days, non-farm-related events, personal health appointments, "bucket list" wishes, etc. Protected time-off is not flexible and the business is structured around this time off definitely being taken.

→ Many farmers offer protected-time-off, typically holidays, to their staff first believing it is a more generous thing to do, however it causes resentment and frustration for both the farmer and his/her family who have all the risk of the business and should have some of the perks. Discount your own protected time first.

- negotiable-time-off is non-essential time

→ Compromising on negotiable-time-off is a quick and easy win for the employer when it comes to staff satisfaction.

- skeleton shift/essentials may happen around significant festivities/holidays or prior to stressed periods such as block calving.

→ Every farm should strive to achieve a skeleton shift rota at weekends to compensate for the often challenging 7-day week nature of farming, helping to attract employees who wish to align with the 'rest of the world' and have weekends off! This will significantly increase the employee candidate pool.

2. Mark known events in the farming year



→ There are many predictable events in the dairy year no matter what the system. Mark in:

- calving (divided into intense and less intense weeks),

fertilising, breeding, sowing, harvest, silage/hay windows, grass measuring, herd testing, drying off, discussion group days, conferences, farm-related events, etc,

- If you are in an All Year Round (AYR) system, then many of the above would add pressure to an already full day so it is critical to spot extra pressures to the daily routine.
 - the more information you can provide the better your planner will work
 - if certain times of the year are more difficult than others it is important to let people know.
- Offering an explanation as to why things are tough, when it's likely to end and how to cope in the meantime could be the difference between someone staying on or leaving because they believe they are not coping.
- In addition to the planner, the "year in pictures" would also help tell the "story". Somebody who has never experienced a drought or seen animals under those conditions would value the re-assurance that while not ideal it is manageable, for example.

TOP TIP: At this point look for any conflict between time off farm and critical work and make sure you have some solutions to manage that clash, with cancelling your protected-time-off being a worst-case scenario solution.

3. Relieve known stressed periods in the preceding months

- To be resilient, it is critical not to find yourself doing anything other than what you should be doing, particularly in a known stressed period.
- When we are under excess pressure, we have limited thinking capacity and can only deal with what's in front of us. Extra stress burdens the system and can have a very high psychological cost. It is critical to remove as much panic and reactive behaviour as possible to maintain a resilient system.
- By looking for gaps on the planner we can take advantage of quieter times to catch up with tasks that will make upcoming stressed periods easier:
 - mark in dates for forward-buying to prevent the cost of reactive/panic purchasing, carry out water and feed audits to anticipate requirements in advance, have a fencing focus so paddocks are always ready when they're needed, etc
 - gaps in the planner also provide great opportunities for spontaneous (paid) time/days off to reward great performance or alleviate tired bodies, as well as management and development opportunities such as attending training sessions, conferences or farm walks.



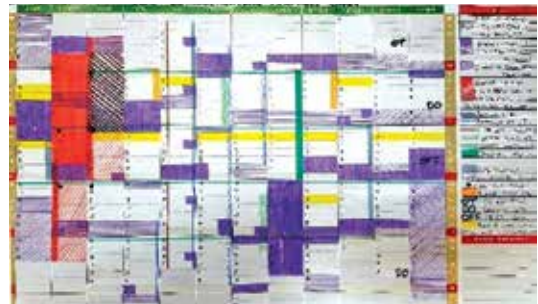
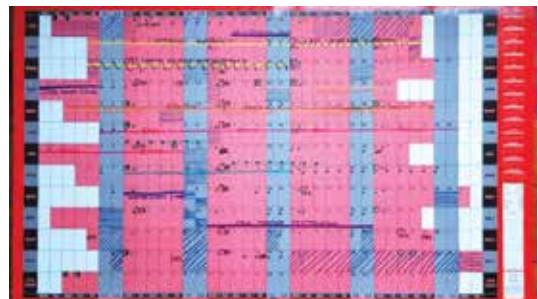
4. Add staff availability

- Finally, with a comprehensively informed planner you can:
 - ask your staff to discuss, negotiate and confirm their time off with attention being paid to critical times of year where taking time off is discouraged

- Ideally employers should include the times of year when staff should not take leave in the employment contract and have employees agree to and sign to confirm that agreement e.g. block calving, breeding, etc. Not to do so exposes the business at a critical time. This is common in other sectors.
 - where there are several members of staff and the planner begins to get messy, come up with a solution collectively (greater buy-in) as how best to represent the information. For example, print the planner on clear plastic (stationery/office supplies shops/online will do this) with a separate plastic sheet for each member of staff and then place these sheets over the original planner prepared by the farmer/unit manager.
- The planner is further strengthened if individuals are assigned to the marked-out tasks in advance.

ADDITIONAL NOTES:

- Yearly planners can be printed vertically or horizontally with people preferring either format → ask the people in your business what they prefer.



- When planning the following year, the previous year's planner can be reviewed to assess whether time allocation was accurate and where the bottlenecks occurred informing future procedure.
- Effective time management has a dramatic impact on personal well-being, stress management and life-satisfaction ratings.
- Effective time management is a core principle in project, lean and change management. ■■

FURTHER READING

- 7 Habits of Highly Effective People** – Stephen Covey (esp. Habits 1,2 & 3)
- Eat that Frog** – Brian Tracy
- The On-Time, On-Target Manager** – Ken Blanchard & Steve Gottry
- The One Minute Manager Meets the Monkey** – Ken Blanchard, William Oncken JR & Hall Burrows

The Organized Mind – Daniel Levitin (advanced reading taking a deeper look into how the brain processes information including time management)

TEDTALKS

- How to Multiply your Time** – Rory Vaden
- Inside the Mind of a Master Procrastinator** – Tim Urban