



Monitor Farm meeting discusses five 'P' steps to making better use of time

Thinking about time and how to best manage it could be the key to making more progress, reducing stress and achieving key goals on-farm and in business.

Speaking at the recent [Banff and Buchan Monitor Farm](#) meeting at Sauchentree near Fraserburgh, Aberdeenshire, farmer and podcaster Michael Blanche discussed how he had addressed the 'chaos' in his own farming enterprise by thinking about time in five 'P' steps.

"I am a recovering chaotic person!" he told the meeting. "I used to spend a huge amount of time looking for stuff. I'm a first-generation farmer, and on a limited duration tenancy, so I wanted to do a lot, but I knew I only had a limited time to achieve that." He said there are five key steps – all beginning with the letter P - to making better use of time.

P1 - Perspective

Make a grid with ten columns across and nine rows down so you have 90 boxes. "Each box represents a year of your life if you are lucky. Shade in up to your age; what's left unshaded is the time you have left to achieve what you want.

"This is a really good way to look at how much time you realistically have left – it helps to give some perspective and can help you look at things differently. People avoid thinking about this but it's actually a positive thing.

"In my case, I know exactly how much time I have left on the farm which has really focussed my mind. I know I must tackle my weaknesses with time really aggressively to be any good as a farmer and to make the best of it."

P2 - Purpose

Think about what you really want to do or achieve in that time, he said. "If you are going to use time properly, you need to know where you are going. What is your purpose?"

"If your ladder is up against the wrong wall, every step is taking you to the wrong place, so think about what you want."

P3 - Priorities

Knowing what your purpose is will help define your priorities – and to know what to say ‘no’ to, he said.

“There is a story about someone asking businessman Warren Buffet about how to deal with being overwhelmed. His answer was to write down all your priorities in life from one to 25 and put them in order of importance to you.

“Then, go to number six and score it out, and score everything below it out too; they might be things you like, but they will take up your time and they are not a priority. The top five are your priorities.”

Michael acknowledged that it can be difficult to stick to those priorities, especially if they are not shared by others. “In that sort of situation, it can be really helpful to do some root cause analysis about it – so ask yourself why something hasn’t worked or been your priority.”

He said that drilling down into something by asking yourself ‘why didn’t I do the task or why didn’t it happen’, then taking the answer and asking why again, and then repeating this for the next few answers usually results in realising that it’s something as simple as not putting it in a diary or sharing your plans.

Writing a to-do list every morning also helps to focus attention and had been helpful in making sure he stuck to his priorities, he said.

P4 - Patterns

“People often want to solve their time management issues but find it hard; it is usually because they are stuck in a pattern. For instance, you will generally know who will be early or late to a meeting, first to plant their crops or last to plough. Breaking negative patterns is important for managing time.”

However, it’s often difficult to change something which is a pattern, and he said people could often be unwilling to address it. “Before you want to change you often have to be very unhappy with the current situation. Recognising that you need or want to change is really good.”

He said that while changing patterns was often hard, it is possible to coach yourself to do it. Rather than berating yourself for doing or not doing something, it was better to take a more positive approach. “Think to yourself ‘yes, well I have done that, but how could I have done it differently or better?’ That positive self-talk can be very helpful in breaking the pattern.”

P5 - Processes

Thinking about how farming and business operations could be more time efficient usually comes down to recognising where time is wasted, which can be due to the way things have evolved, he said.

“People often wince when the word efficiency is mentioned, and I did too, but I’ve changed my mind about it, and it’s a good way of finding more time to tackle your priorities.

“This Monitor Farm is a case in point, as at lambing, the team lambed in two sheds quite a distance apart. Simply by clearing out a shed closer to the main lambing shed and thus cutting the distance for walking back and forth Bruce [Irvine, the Monitor Farmer] estimated a saving of 1 hour 20 minutes a day for all the lambing team. Over a month that’s a total saving of 40 hours.”

Michael said that while many meetings focus on technical efficiency such as feed or animal health, these were only a point in time. “There is a huge amount of time being wasted on farm. Farmers should really think of themselves as process engineers; how can you design a process – and stick to it – that will be efficient?”

“Saving 15 minutes a day, for instance, might not seem much, but over 365 days it’s more than 90 hours, or two weeks of work for ‘normal’ people. There are hundreds of processes on farm, improving the efficiency of each would add up to a saving far greater than 15 minutes a day. We will probably all find something to fill that time with, but it’s time that you could be adding value to your business.

“The main thing from all of this is to think about time and how you are using it. We usually don’t recognise it or respect it, but it’s a wholly positive thing when you recognise it is limited – it makes you master the things you want to do.”

Photo caption:

Thinking more strategically about time can help drive farming businesses forward, Michael Blanche told the Banff and Buchan Monitor Farm meeting.

