

LABOUR MANAGEMENT FACT SHEET

SOUTHERN REGION

IMPROVING TIME MANAGEMENT AND LABOUR EFFICIENCY

Effective farm business managers use a range of tools to complete important tasks efficiently and in a timely manner.



PHOTO: ISTOCK

Time is the only resource every person has in equal amounts, however some people achieve more in a given time frame compared to others. Time management and timeliness are skills that can be learned and improved upon.

A starting point is to create task lists and use tools to help prioritise and complete tasks.

The benefits of effective time management include achieving goals within timeframes and reducing time spent on tasks that are not a priority.

From a farm business point of view, this means ensuring everything is in order so

KEY POINTS

- ▶ Learn how to manage your time better to achieve your business goals.
- ▶ Record, monitor and assess how time is spent.
- ▶ Get comfortable using to-do lists, whether they are daily, weekly or monthly.
- ▶ Develop a consistent way to rank and prioritise tasks.
- ▶ Learn to delegate tasks to other employees or contractors where appropriate.
- ▶ *“The key is not to prioritise what’s on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities.”*
Stephen Covey

FIGURE 1 An example annual calendar outlining labour hours allocated to each task for a 2000 hectare cropping farm.

Job/Task	Hours per month											
	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
Management and planning	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20
Spraying	70	-	70	50	50	35	35	35	35	-	-	-
Cultivation	-	-	-	30	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sowing/seeding	-	-	-	50	120	30	-	-	-	-	-	-
Crop inspections	5	5	5	5	5	10	10	10	10	10	10	5
Spreading/top dressing	-	-	-	-	-	-	60	60	-	-	-	-
Windrowing	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	50	-	-
Harvesting	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	100	150
Grain cartage, storage and handling	-	-	10	10	10	-	-	-	-	-	100	150
Machinery maintenance	10	10	20	20	20	10	10	10	20	20	20	10
General farm maintenance	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
Purchasing supplies	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
Total hours per month	125	55	145	205	245	125	155	155	105	120	270	355
Number of FTE per month	0.8	0.3	0.9	1.2	1.5	0.8	0.9	0.9	0.6	0.7	1.6	2.2
Difference in FTE per month	-0.2	-0.7	-0.1	0.2	0.5	-0.2	-0.1	-0.1	-0.4	-0.3	0.6	1.2

Key: orange indicates there are more hours of work than one FTE; yellow indicates there are less hours of work than one FTE; and green indicates a similar amount of work to one FTE.

FIGURE 2 An example weekly task list.

Week commencing: Monday 11th February				
Task	Who	Expected time to complete	Completion date	Priority level
Book seed cleaner	FB	30 minutes	11/02	A
Complete paddock plans for Block B	FB	12 hours	15/02	A
Check paddocks for weed emergence	JT	1.5 hours	12/02	A
Clean out and organise workshop	JT	3 hours	14/02	B
Change gate into paddock 15	JT	1 hour	15/02	C

critical jobs such as sowing or harvest can be completed in a timely and efficient manner.

Task lists

Task lists provide a documented reminder and can be used to help schedule workloads. Task lists can be annual, seasonal, monthly, weekly and daily. They can also be broken down by enterprise, farm/block or person/labour unit.

Where to begin?

Think of the farm tasks at an annual or seasonal level and group them on a general timeline. Figure 1 provides an example of an annual calendar which gives an overview of the tasks and budgeted hours across the year.

Larger tasks can be broken down into main actions or jobs and be allocated to a

weekly task list. This can help plan ahead and ensure the major tasks are completed in a timely manner.

For example, seeding is one of the major tasks for grain growers. Tasks such as maintenance and preparation of seeding equipment; purchasing seed treatments and other inputs; booking the seed cleaner; and allocating and storing seed, can be allocated to weekly task lists well ahead of time.

Creating a task list

Before prioritising different tasks, begin by developing a working task list. Write down all the tasks that need to be completed on a piece of paper or on the computer. There are numerous task list templates available through operating software such as MS Office, or that can be downloaded from the internet.

It is important not to fall into the trap of just listing the urgent jobs. List the important ones, both long and short-term jobs.

When scheduling weekly or daily tasks group jobs together based on location or similarity of tasks. For example, if there are three jobs to be done on an 'out-block' 20 kilometres away, group them together on the task list. Then all the tools, equipment and materials for the three jobs can be taken initially preventing toing and froing for things that may have been forgotten.

Tip: Don't overload the task list, be realistic.

Prioritising tasks

Adopting the use of some simple tools to help prioritise or categorise the jobs on the task list can help improve time management and labour efficiency.

One way to prioritise tasks is to allocate the letters A, B and C against each task, where A's are the most important tasks, B tasks are of medium importance and C's are those that are not important.

There is often a temptation to do all the C tasks and get them out of the way first, but this may mean never getting to the A tasks.

Another way to prioritise is to use a time management matrix, as outlined in Figure 3. This focuses time on the on the important jobs that contribute to business results and goals. The quadrants in Figure 3 are used to prioritise tasks or activities into four categories:

1. Important and urgent
2. Important but not urgent
3. Not important but urgent
4. Not important and not urgent

Good managers spend most of their time on tasks in Quadrant 2, commonly referred to as 'quality time', where outcomes lead to the achievement of important goals. Focusing time in this quadrant will help keep things in control, avoid crises, and lead to higher performance and better time use. Activities include planning ahead and completing tasks prior to peak times so periods such as harvest and sowing are completed efficiently. This quadrant also includes time for yourself and family.

Jobs in Quadrant 1 are those that cannot necessarily be planned for and result in crisis management or time spent 'putting out fires'. Other jobs in Quadrant 1 are

FIGURE 3 Time management matrix.

1. IMPORTANT AND URGENT	2. IMPORTANT BUT NOT URGENT
'Critical activities' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Crises, such as getting grain into storage. > Pressing problems, such as fixing a machinery breakdown mid-harvest. > Deadline-driven jobs, such as post-sowing pre-emergent herbicide applications. 	'Important goals' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Reviewing business plans and budgets, and developing a commodity marketing plan. > Crop and livestock monitoring. > Preparation and prevention activities, such as machinery maintenance. > Annual holidays. > Kid's sport.
3. NOT IMPORTANT BUT URGENT	4. NOT IMPORTANT AND NOT URGENT
'Interruptions' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Pulling neighbours or visitors out when bogged. > Lending equipment or supplies to neighbours. > Some phone calls, emails and mail. > Some field days and meetings. 	'Distractions' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Time wasters such as company representatives whose products are not applicable. > Attending clearing sales without the need to purchase items. > Some phone calls, emails and mail. > 'Escape' activities, such as mindless web-browsing or paddock cruising.

ADAPTED FROM: STEPHEN COVEY, *FIRST THINGS FIRST*

those that have been left to the last minute and have consequently become urgent. Good planning and time management can help avoid some jobs reaching crisis point.

Jobs in Quadrant 1 need to be actively managed, and those in Quadrant 2 should be focused on.

There are plenty of interruptions in Quadrant 3 that need to be monitored to ensure the tasks and activities don't take up too much precious time. Generally speaking, if too much time is spent on tasks in this quadrant, time is often spent trying to please others by agreeing to do tasks that are not a high priority.

Finally, Quadrant 4 is where the least time should be spent. Some of these tasks can be delegated or simply eliminated. This quadrant includes time wasting and distracting tasks or jobs of little or no actual value.

Both Quadrant 3 and 4 need to be avoided where possible.

Make an effort to record time use for a few weeks and estimate how much time is spent in each quadrant. Then, after recording time use, compare the actual percentage of time spent in each quadrant and work out where improvements could be made.

Tip: It is important to use time management and task tools until they become part of daily or weekly habits. Try different approaches to find the best one for your situation. Don't give up.

FIGURE 4 Pareto's 80:20 rule.



The 80:20 rule

The 80:20 rule is commonly applied to many aspects of daily and business life. It was Vilfredo Pareto, an Italian economist, who applied the law stating the first 20 per cent of items generally represent 80 per cent of the total value. For example seeding and harvesting account for 22 per cent of the total time in Figure 1. It could be considered that completing these two activities in a timely and efficient manner may result in 80 per cent of value in this example.

Pareto also discussed that when creating task lists, things should be listed in descending order of priority or significance, helping complete important tasks first.

Applying the law to time management shows that 20 per cent of effort will result in 80 per cent of reward. If time is spent trying to polish and finalise work, it typically results in a 20 per cent gain. Time should be focused on doing the tasks that yield the most value to the business, such as Quadrant 2 tasks illustrated in Figure 3.

Tip: Test Pareto's law by listing 15 tasks associated with a larger job or project such

as sowing or harvesting. Observe if the top 20 per cent of the tasks result in 80 per cent of the value of the overall job.

Good time management habits

There are some important things to remember when integrating time management skills on farm.

Firstly, people who plan well generally manage their time well and have better control over their business.

Tip: Manage your time, don't let time manage you. It is important to be able to manage your own time before you can effectively manage others'.

Good systems and procedures are valuable, and must be able to adapt. When something unexpected pops up, consider where it fits into the time management matrix and deal with it accordingly.

Being conscious and aware of when a plan changes, or when something happens out of your control, can help to manage the task list. Aim to delegate some tasks during these times. Consider who's time is best spent on the urgent-important tasks and which tasks can be delegated. This may also involve saying no to some tasks and eliminating others.

Learning to say no can be particularly difficult. It is an important skill for both work and personal life. Saying no can help make sure you don't end up with too many tasks that are interruptions – not important but urgent.

Tasks should be scheduled at appropriate times of the day or week to suit energy

FIGURE 5 An example timesheet for recording and allocating time.

Month	CROPS			REPAIRS & MAINT		LIVESTOCK		TRUCK	GENERAL		OTHER	HOLIDAYS		TOTAL
Date	Spraying & Monitoring	Seeding & Spreading	Harvesting	Machinery	Fencing & Impr.	Husbandry	Feeding & Drovers	Driving	Office & Admin	Training		Day off / Leave	Public Holiday	Total Hours
1														
2														
3														
4														
5														
6														
7														
8														
9														
10														
11														
12														
13														
14														
15														
16														
17														

Good time management habits

- ▶ Group similar tasks or jobs and do them concurrently.
- ▶ Tackle the high priority jobs first.
- ▶ Start important tasks immediately – no matter how much you don't like doing them.
- ▶ Delegate and develop others to be competent at completing tasks.
- ▶ Learn to use idle time wisely.
- ▶ Avoid a cluttered workspace.
- ▶ Learn to say no.

(Adapted from: The Ohio State University fact sheet – *Tips on effective time management*)

and concentration levels and required conditions. For example, schedule office work early in the day and checking stock or loading grain later in the day. Everyone works differently, so consider how scheduling tasks throughout the day or week might improve efficiency or productivity.

Timesheets

Assessing and recording the use of time is a useful step in determining how time is spent. Without actually recording time use, it is easy to make assumptions about where and what time is spent on.

Be honest about how time is spent, and remember that bad habits have to be identified first before they can be overcome.

When employing staff it is important to track where time is going and review time allocation periodically. Figure 5 provides an example timesheet for daily recording of time across a month.

Employees are commonly required to fill in daily time sheets. Employee timesheets can help identify where time is being 'sapped' and how down time is impacting on efficiency.

Tip: Timesheets should be filled out or completed daily, or at least weekly, to ensure they are as accurate as possible.

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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why should I care about time management?

We all have the same hours available. Time management provides structure so we can achieve more with less stress. The use of these hours determines efficiency and timeliness of operations for key tasks such as seeding, spraying and harvest.

Is there one time management system that works for everyone?

No, you need to adapt a system to suit your management and personality style. You know your time management is working for you when you come home at night feeling good about your day and knowing the important tasks have been completed on time.

Should I spend my time working or planning to work?

There needs to be a balance between both. Do your most important work during your most productive hours. Planning increases your capacity to work efficiently. We fire on all cylinders at different times of the day.

Should I focus on daily tasks or weekly planning?

Daily tasks are necessary to achieve the weekly plan. The weekly plan contributes to the monthly targets, which builds towards achieving seasonal and annual goals.

Which jobs should I do first?

Set A, B and C priorities, and focus on the A tasks; or use the time management matrix and focus on tasks in Quadrant 2 (Figure 3). Avoid being distracted when busy, however, when key jobs are done, some non-urgent tasks, such as talking to the neighbour, can be beneficial and provide lifestyle balance.

Everyone's time has a dollar value. By assessing how each person spends time, a dollar value can be used to help determine the most effective use of a person's time or whether some of the tasks should be undertaken by other people. For example labouring work might be allocated at \$30 per hour, and management at \$80 per hour.

Once time is recorded, allocate tasks and activities into different time use categories, such as those in the time management matrix in Figure 3. Reflect on the percentage of time spent in each category and consider: is there is a good balance between work, family and social time?

Rest and refresh: 'sharpen your axe'

An important part of managing time effectively includes allocating time to yourself, family and others. There are times

when the best use of our time is not to be at work, not to think about work and to have a total break so you are fully refreshed and ready for work.

Make sure to schedule regular time to 'sharpen your axe'.

This is particularly difficult and potentially even more important for farmers and other people who work from home.

Good time management habits are contagious and a classic case of 'do as I do'.

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