



Time is a Scarce Resource! Practice Effective Time Management

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If you are like other producers, there are rarely, if ever, enough hours in the day. Between feeding, sorting, loading, human resource management, and dropping the kids off at school, you might find yourself bouncing to and fro at breakneck speeds. But, do you know where you are going – and are you focused on what you are doing - when you are moving that fast? Time management is an important skill to develop and consciously allocating your time to various activities can make you more efficient, effective, and ensure that you are spending your time on the activities that are moving you in the direction you want to go.

Inventory of Your Time

Creating an inventory of your time is an insightful way to learn how your time is spent. For many of us, our time is not spent exactly how we would like to think it is. Below is a simple example of how you can formally inventory your time.

SPRING (March-April-May)										
	0-10%	10-20%	20-30%	30-40%	40-50%	50-60%	60-70%	70-80%	80-90%	90-100%
Checking Feeder Pigs	■	■								
Manure Application			■	■	■					
Loading/Unloading					■					
Row-crop Operations						■	■	■		

- One way to think about this is:
- A. How much time does this project take me?
 - B. How often will I do this during the evaluated time period?

For example, checking feeder pigs might take two hours and is done every day; about 20% of your time over the three-months of spring. Manure application takes up all of your workday for three weeks; about 25% of your spring.

- A couple things to consider:
- 1) Inventory your time in a horizon appropriate for the situation being analyzed. Annually, quarterly, monthly, and weekly could all be appropriate for evaluating different situations.
 - 2) Remember there are a limited number of hours in a day! Time is a scare resource! Additionally, you won't spend your time 100% efficiently; distractions take up time and fires will need putting out. In the above example,

it wouldn't be very useful to assume there are 12 hours in the day and 120 days to work. Be realistic with how much time you really have to allocate to tasks in your work day.

Accessing Your Activities

In addition to inventorying your time, it's important to sit down with a blank sheet of paper and write-out the components of your operation that create the most value (profitability). In other words, take the time to prioritize how your time should be spent. Is it walking the barns to sort out sick piglets? Is it sourcing feed? What is your competitive advantage that you are working to improve and capitalize on effectively?

Second, create a list of things that are important to you. Taking the kids to school? Keeping the barn clean? Maintaining mowed and tidy facilities?

Now compare these two lists to your time inventory. Are you spending a majority of time working on activities related to your competitive advantage? Are you able to spend time doing those things that are important to you?

Ask yourself these simple questions for each of the listed items (from the time inventory, competitive advantages, and importance list):

- 1) How important is it that I do the task? (Cleaning the barns versus taking kids to school)
- 2) If I dedicated more time to the task, what would the impacts (positive or negative) be? (Increased profitability? Happier employees? No changes?)
- 3) If I dedicated less time to the task, what would the impacts (positive or negative) be? (Less profitability? Less happy employees? No changes?)

At the end of this process, identify tasks that are important (personally or in your operation) and the consequences of dedicating more or less time to that activity. How much of your time is actually devoted to the most important tasks? How are you going to allocate your time to devote even more time to these activities; more time to these activities will benefit your farm and personal life, so why wouldn't you spend as much time as possible on these tasks? What are the activities to which you can reduce the amount of time you are dedicating in order to free up your time to allocate to areas with better paybacks – or higher returns?

Tools That Could Help You

Mobile Devices

Have you considered using mobile devices to help you manage your time more efficiently? Mobile devices are everywhere. They come in every shape and form. Mobile devices can be good – or – bad – for time management. They can serve as a distraction in some cases, but some conscious decisions surrounding their use can lead to improved efficiency and perhaps – even save you time.

One of the biggest arguments that you might use against mobile devices is the cost. The initial cost, depending on your service contract, could cost several hundred dollars. Then a data plan – to make your mobile device fully-functional - could also cost you monthly on into the future. How much do you value your time? Think about if a new device could benefit you. For example, if you thought a new tablet (or iPad) would cost you \$100 per month (data plan and device purchase price) and save you 30 minutes a day- 30 minutes that could be spent with your family instead of in the office. If you value your time more than \$7 per hour, this technology might make sense financially.

Outsourcing

When thinking about outsourcing, evaluating your time in different time horizons is important. There are a couple options for outsourcing, but the timing aspect is important to think about. Will outsourcing this task free up a little time each week? Or just a week out of the year? Which is more valuable to you?

Is there an office task that you can outsource? Is there an employee or a child who wants to be involved with your operation that you can trust to cut-checks, for example? Have you considered hiring an accountant instead of staying awake

at night looking through piles of receipts? There are numerous options for you to hire people who can help you with tasks that take up a lot of your time, freeing you up for more critical issues. Potentially you could outsource activities like manure application. This could free up a large block of your time in the spring. Alternatively, hiring someone to help with custom harvest could alleviate some time pressure in the harvest season.

Also think about all of the implications of outsourcing. Would having someone paying your bills make you better off as this person provides great weekly summary reports, or will you spend more time double-checking their work? Would outsourcing the manure application leave you financially and legally at risk for a spill they might cause, or would it reduce the amount of record-keeping, certification, and reporting you would have to do? Consider the farm-specific circumstances surrounding these decisions; there is no 'one decision fits all' answer to these questions.

Wasting Time

One of the biggest time drains has already been alluded to: Efficiency. How much time are you wasting? Wasting time takes a number of forms, commonly in the form of procrastination. We can procrastinate for a whole host of reasons, but surfing the web aimlessly won't get the job done any faster. It can be very hard to get the tasks we dread the most completed. Do yourself a favor and stop procrastinating. Find a tool to help you, hire someone to help you, or just get it started (and done).

Consider allocating time to breaks and time off of work to increase efficiency when on the job. Taking breaks and surfing the web are all fine on break time. Just don't mix and mangle balancing the farm check book with craigslist shopping. We have all experienced those days where you are 'doing something' all day but at the end of the day you haven't accomplished anything. Consider whether allocating break time would increase your efficiency when working; doing so might help you get a task that should take 30 minutes done in 30 minutes, rather than it taking 4 hours because you've been doing 15 other things on the side the whole time.

Planning for Contingencies

Even the best laid plans will struggle when a wet spring has left your manure application, corn planting, and spraying to all be done at the same time. Do you have a back-up plan? Do you have your employees cross-trained so they can fill in and run the manure application, planter, and sprayer?

Keeping a general handle on how you use your time resources could be helpful during these times. By looking over the tasks that you would normally do in the spring, and realizing that you only have 60% of the time to do it in, you can identify what tasks are easiest to put off for another day and what needs be hired out.

Beyond You

These tools and this exercise are helpful and useful beyond the farm owner and manager. Consider using these exercises with employees and partners. Note that it is important that you use this as a beneficial tool and not a micro-management device.

Consider how these tools can be beneficial for the farm overall. What takes up a majority of your operations total labor or management time? You spending 10% of your time cleaning barns might not raise a red flag, but 10% of the entire operations time devoted might be an opportunity for improvement.