

Machinery and Labor Sharing: Choosing Partners

Choosing partners is a critical step in forming a successful equipment and/or labor sharing arrangement. It is important to find partners that you can trust, you can communicate with and you can work with effectively. How will the characteristics of the farming operation, work habits, unique skills and personality traits of potential partners mesh with your own?

Similarity versus Complementarity

One way to think about the types of characteristics you might seek in potential partners is to consider both **similarities** and **complementarities**. For some aspects of the farming operation you will want to find like-minded partners. For example, we have a natural tendency to associate with people who are “like” us. This can make communication among group members and group decision making easier, but assembling a group of “like” members may also result in overlapping skills and knowledge.

Having partners that complement you and your operation may work to your advantage. If group members bring different skills, strengths and interests to the group, “the total may be greater than the sum of the parts.” For example, if you dislike bookwork and numbers, finding a partner who enjoys record keeping could provide a real benefit.

A self-assessment can be a good place to start. Knowing what skills you bring to the table and which one you lack will help you identify characteristics you would like to have in your partners. Do you have specific skills to contribute to a group? Are you good at repairs? Do you like to manage people? Do you enjoy marketing grain?

Farm Characteristics

Table 1 provides some examples of farm characteristics, work habits, unique skills and personality traits that may be important to consider. Some basic issues include whether you or your partners need time to care for livestock, whether your farming practices and machinery types are compatible or could be made compatible, whether your cropping patterns are similar.

Work Habits

Work habits are another area for consideration. Do you like to start early, work long hours, keep a regular schedule? Do you have an off-farm job? Do you take time out to attend your children’s ball games or other activities? Do you prefer to fix machinery yourself, or hire someone else to do it? It will be important to come to an agreement with your partners about such issues. Keep in mind that in some cases, having different work habits could work to your advantage. For example, you may like to start work early during harvest and be done early. Your partner may prefer starting later, but is willing to work late into the evenings. Rather than seeing this as a conflict, you could implement shifts that keep the combine running more hours per day.

Personality Traits

Finally, while we don't often think about our personality traits as a farm management factor, they can play a big role in the success of group activities like equipment sharing. Being somewhat flexible about issues like when crops are planted and harvested is certainly critical. Other personality traits, like openness to new ideas and willingness to take risks can be important as well. As with the both farm characteristics and work habits, finding partners to complement your strengths may work to your advantage. If you prefer to work alone, a sharing arrangement may not be for you. But if you prefer to work with others, a joint operation may make farming more rewarding and enjoyable.

Which is more important – similarity or complementarity? Finding partners who are similar to you eases communication and helps to facilitate good personal relationships. Working with people who share your motives for farming could also be important. In contrast, complementarity can work to your advantage in other ways – having a variety of knowledge, skills, experience, equipment, and even land type could make all group members better off.

References:

Baron, R. and S. Shane, Entrepreneurship: A Process Perspective. Mason, OH: Thompson South-Western, 2004, page 109-113.

Table ? : What are you looking for?

| Farm Characteristics | | Work Habits | |
|----------------------|---|-----------------------------------|--|
| | Grain only | Early riser | |
| | Livestock only | Night owl | |
| | Mixed grain and livestock | Steady work pace with breaks | |
| | 8 or 16 row equipment | Work until the job is done | |
| | 12 or 24 row equipment | Weekends off | |
| | Have 30" rows | First to start – first to finish | |
| | Have narrow rows | Wait until conditions are "right" | |
| | Primarily "Heavy" soils | Stop and fix it "right" | |
| | Primarily "Light" soils | Fix it quick and keep going | |
| | Outstanding shop facilities | Neatness counts | |
| | Have excess labor | | |
| | Have excess equipment | | |
| | Spouse is heavily involved in operation | | |
| | Off farm obligations | | |
| | Land base is scattered | | |
| | Land base is centralized | | |
| | | | |
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| Unique Skills | | Personal Traits | |
|---------------|---------------------------------|--|--|
| | Mechanical Repair | A Planner | |
| | Record keeping | Flexible on what land is planted first | |
| | Accounting | Detail oriented | |
| | Marketing | "Big Picture" thinker | |
| | Fabrication | Problem solver | |
| | Agronomy | Creative | |
| | Animal Science | Understanding | |
| | Commercial Driver's License | Outgoing | |
| | Commercial Applicator's License | Quiet | |
| | People management | Independent | |
| | | Conservative | |
| | | Takes calculated risks | |
| | | Peace maker | |
| | | Optimistic | |
| | | Desires change | |
| | | Diplomatic | |
| | | Accepts challenges | |
| | | Enthusiastic | |
| | | Quick learner | |
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