



News

Young Blood

Work Hard

Tech Talk

Growing a Career

Play Hard

Hunter-Gatherer

Feeding Out

Cut A Track

Chosen Pathways

Bark Off

Editorial

How To

About YC

Virtual Magazine

Young Country Plus

Crash Paddock

Young Farmers Contest

# Growing me, growing you

g+1 0

Tweet 0

Tim Fulton • 1 year ago

Share 0

Share

More in  
Work Hard

Tangata  
Whenua  
Training

Ben of the high  
country

Ahuwhenua  
winning wahine

Sharing success  
with staff

Handing on the  
handpiece

Mentoring  
mission

From a cream  
can to Piccadilly  
Circus



South Island farm magnate Dairy Holdings owns more than 50 farms, has 300 staff, and milks about 40,000 cows on more than 14,000ha. It prides itself on another statistic: the number of staff it has helped grow into farm ownership. Young Country's Tim Fulton met two of those farming couples and had a talk to chief executive Colin Glass about the company's training pathway.

Making the step from contract milker or sharemilker to outright farm ownership is hard but not impossible, Dairy Holdings chief executive Colin Glass says.

The art of stock judging  
Attitude king for career changers  
Capturing the image of farming

Colin Glass: "People talk about how it's nigh on impossible to progress within the dairy industry these days ... people are finding different ways of doing it."

The 13-year-old company has long been a proving-ground for sharemilkers, even in the face of the New Zealand industry's swing to farm managers over 50:50 contractors.

DHL encourages managers and contract milkers with the right qualities to bring livestock on to farms as a means of increasing their personal equity and helping them into full herd ownership.

Glass said he was still stunned at the thought that every year about one-third of DHL sharemilkers went on to buy their own property.

That average transition rate has remained steady despite occasional wild swings, like in 2008 when 11 made the jump, or the peak of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) when no one went anywhere.

Such seasonal variation could be put down to land prices relative to cow values, as well as factors like bank confidence during the GFC, but the fact remained people were progressing to their own properties.

"People talk about how it's nigh on impossible to progress within the dairy industry these days," Glass says. "Certainly the numbers are bigger these days, there's no doubt about that, but people are finding different ways of doing it."

[Join the conversation and comment on this article!](#)

The number of contract milkers and lower order positions in the industry had flourished, to a point where equity partners that once employed only managers were thinking again.

"Why is this? I think it's because that there continues to be a need for the industry to progress its people ... and the dairy industry has been incredibly positive in this. We've had this run for 25 years at least where people have been able to come in, step up and progress. And it's brilliant; no one has a negative bone in their body."

The energetic mood on farms had definitely invigorated DHL over the years, Glass says.

At the same time the company's approach to career development had become more systematic.

The relatively lean management team had long grappled with a group of farmers repeatedly reporting the same problems, while another category of staff would get by mostly trouble-free.

The company adopted an accreditation programme called Investors in People NZ, which tests for 12 indicators of success across four broad areas - farm planning, training and development, people management, and compliance.



Firstly, staff would be given feedback on their performance, building to a point where an employee was either given a chance to either step up in the business or, conversely, to step out.

The approach allowed DHL to match its intuitive understanding of staff and farm systems with a sharp analytical tool.

## **Years in the making**

It takes more than luck to do well in corporate dairying, managers Mick and Kirsten O'Connor say.

The couple are making a career in Mid-Canterbury with Dairy Holdings (DHL), farming and advising for the multi-farm company near the Synlait dairy factory.

Mick and Kirsten have people ask them how they've been able to take ownership of 1000 cows in just a few years while becoming leaders in the DHL farm network.

If it sounds like a dream run you have to remember it has been about 15 years in the making.

Mick's first dairy job was 18 months on two small units at Fairlie, in South Canterbury.

He says now the experience was "awesome", but admits he struggled with winters as cold as minus 10C. He hankered for a bigger milking platform with a longer spring and found his niche just over the fence from his farm today at Bankside.

After four years with a business partner of local dairy identity Leo Donkers, Mick took a job with Mark and Andrea Schoaeder at Hinds. Later it was with DHL's operations supervisor Gary McGregor.

In 2009, Mick and Kirsten set off on a long-planned OE to England. They say now their travelling gave them time to seriously think about building their farm equity.

Mick is modest about their strong progress since then, but it's clear that it hasn't been left to chance.

"Nothing was definitely planned but it sort of just naturally happened because, you know, we were doing a reasonable job at it."

At first DHL offered six months of farm management but the placement soon became a couple of seasons contract milking. That's where they are now, on Terrace Farm.

Kirsten - due to become a mum for the first time - says DHL has always given them room to progress.

"There's good support systems and networks. I don't want to say "dream run" because Mick's worked really hard, but it has made it straightforward to us ... an easy path to progression and building equity."

This year the O'Connors bought 300 cows, adding to the 130 they already owned.

Half of the herd was in-milk this season and the younger stock will be producing next year.

They braced themselves for two years of solid grind as contract milkers and it's only now in a third year that they're feeling more relaxed about their capital base.

"Two years in the grand scheme of things isn't a huge amount – and we still have days off and stuff like that," Mick says.

Mick puts their progress down to a good, basic grounding from the early days. Kirsten, agribusiness analyst with Westpac, says owing money to banks has also been a spur.

DHL keeps Mick fully engaged by having him off-farm as an advisor to DHL's other central Canterbury operations. This commitment takes him away from Bankside pretty regularly so lately he has passed management duties to his Irish workmate, Colm. It adds up to a heady workload but Mick feels comfortable they've got the balance right.

Mick and Kirsten have a lot of people ask them why the business can't employ more Kiwis.

The answer is that in a concentrated dairy district like Bankside it's a struggle to find enough locals to go round.

"You know, within a small group (of farms) you've got about 50 people needed for farm jobs. There's just not that many Kiwis out there."

Mick's top requirement in staff is attitude rather than straight out farming background or qualifications. "If they've got a good attitude we can teach them anything ...we can teach them to milk cows within a week. If they want to do it and they enjoy it they learn pretty quick."

#### FARM STATS:

- Bankside is 278ha and is irrigated with Roto-Rainers, but a switch to centre pivots is on the way.
- The property milks 1000 cows at peak production, through a 48-a-side herringbone.
- Production averages 1450kg/MS a hectare.

### **Consulting, owning, sharemilking**



Combining consultancy and sharemilking works for Leighton Parker.

Leighton Parker gets to see a lot of Dairy Holdings farms - as a consultant, sharemilker and manager of a fair-sized support block.

His sharemilking on Kanuka, near Oxford, encompasses 880 cows, while a nearby 200ha run-off supports wintering for all of the three DHL farms in the area.

Leighton and his wife, Hayley, also have their own 175ha lease block for young stock at View Hill.

It's quite a line of responsibilities but the company has earmarked Leighton as one of its strongest performers.

Before joining Dairy Holdings Ltd (DHL) he had three years with DairyNZ as a consulting officer in Mid-Canterbury.

Leighton had always been keen on going farming and he grabbed an opportunity when DHL offered a consulting position, then some contract milking.

Leighton and Hayley are in their second season with the company as lower order sharemilkers.

This season's exceptional milk price has allowed them to draw enough cash to buy a lease block as a means to run more cows and grow their equity further.

This season has been fairly kind for them. There's been good rainfall (heaps, in fact) and this has made it easier to manage feed requirements.

It hasn't taken long for Leighton to become a fixture in DHL's wider operations as one of its Canterbury-based management advisers.

The consultancy role is about working with other farmers to tweak their grass-based systems. Some of those farmers are in sticky situations but others just need some fine-tuning, Leighton says.

He comes at the job with a first-class honours degree in agriculture from Massey but he doesn't presume that giving advice should be a one-way street.

"I've got a role to be able to help the guys but as well as that, I get to take a lot away from their businesses that I can share with other operators or try to apply it to our own business."

In a wider sense he says one of the reasons he joined DHL was its commitment to helping people reach their personal goals, quite aside from what the company might require.

He rates the firm's training programmes for junior consulting officers as a fantastic example of this, and says it's always exciting to see farmers benefit from the extra attention.

It might be good, for example, to see a single farm lift its production by 20,000kg/MS but the buzz was a lot stronger when DHL was able to make it happen across its whole farm network.

"You can have, like, half a million kilo lifts. They're quite significant, really."

Leighton gets the biggest personal kick out of running a system based squarely on top performance from cows and grass. "We've been able to build a really good team around us which has allowed us to grow our business. But the great thing about farming is you wake up every day and you're able to see how the cows are performing. There's an indication that you can monitor ... it's quite an enjoyable process."

That pleasure is surely a good thing because DHL always has a lot of cows in milk and also many to feed on its support blocks.

Leighton – a son of SCION chief executive and career science manager Warren Parker – had a taste of this scale recently while doing paddock assessments for DHL’s support blocks in Canterbury.

“I can’t recall whether it’s about 18 or 19,000 cows that those blocks were supporting. And that’s been quite a logistical task but we’ve had really good results with the cropping this year.”

More generally Hayley and their 18-month-old daughter Ava have found themselves settling happily into the surrounding Oxford community, which is far from their North Island roots.

### **CO skills**

Leighton Parker credits DairyNZ for much of his development as a consulting officer (CO) and the skills he carried on to Dairy Holdings.

The industry body’s training programme for new COs lasts a year and includes all areas of dairy farming. The new COs are usually based in one of nine locations around the country.

DairyNZ’s Canterbury/North Otago regional leader Virginia Serra says COs in training get involved with local activities and start to run discussion groups and events when they show they’re ready.

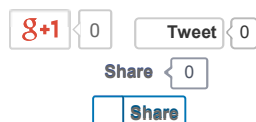
They usually get an experienced team member as a buddy supporting them during this process, while the regional leader and teams coaches also help.

The main modules in the training are grazing, people and business management, as well as facilitation skills, nutrient and environmental management, and sustainability.

There is also farm systems, whole farm assessment, DairyBase training and study of animal welfare and reproduction.

Serra says new consulting officers also work closely with one or more local farmer to make sure they are applying the learning to practical situations and are made aware of regional issues.

The training programme requires work pre- and post training and the new trainee consulting officers are assessed before they are allocated to an area.



Comments Community

 Login ▾

 Recommend

Sort by Newest ▾

Start the discussion...

Be the first to comment.

ALSO ON AGRIHQ

WHAT'S THIS?

**Pulpit - Adding value  
the key to success**

1 comment • 7 days ago

**GDT's surprise fall  
offset by dollar drop**

1 comment • a month ago

**The 1080 conundrum**

1 comment • a month ago

**Dairy competition  
review gets under way**

1 comment • 25 days ago