

The Value of Our Work

One of my favorite adages remains, “work smarter not harder”. The phrase was coined by Allan F. Mogenson, industrial engineer, industry consultant, and pioneer in work simplification efforts. It remains my favorite, because it is in truth my least favorite.

Though we have heard the phrase time and time again from the likes of school teachers, coworkers, and even supervisors, it remains elusive in practice. Especially to those working in agriculture or other “green careers”, the saying can appear somewhat contrary to the realities of the operation. In this work, it may appear that doing that extra chore, or staying out later in the evening to get the field planted (i.e. working harder) pays-off in droves far beyond calling it quits earlier. To this, I cannot help but agree—often working harder is smarter.

However, what I think this adage is trying to convey is the difference in the value of our work. In this, I think it may be helpful to go a bit further and divide the time we spend working into two categories: working in the business (WITB) and working on the business (WOTB).

These are not my terms, rather they come from far smarter and savvier minds. No less, they cut to the heart of how we operate our businesses most profitably.

WITB work is that which we do everyday. These are tasks on a to-do-list like daily chores, moving cattle, mending fence, working on equipment, ect. WITB tasks are indeed fundamental to the operation of the business. Frankly, WITB work is some of the most immediately rewarding and enjoyable work, and in my personal experience, is the reason I became so smitten with agriculture.

WOTB work are the tasks that involve a far greater strategic component. These tasks often involve significant thought like crop planning, evaluating financial performance, or altering human resources management strategies. Clear as day, one can see that these duties typically involve a good bit of office time—time spent away from the enjoyable field-work.

As mentioned, it may be such that the WITB work really kept us working on the farm or pulled us toward the beauty that is agriculture. However, our operations are still in-fact businesses that demand our strategic vision and thoughtful management for success.

With this, the WOTB work feels like “\$100/hr” work while WITB work could be “\$15/hr” work.

The value generated by WOTB work to the business may far exceed the benefits of the WITB work. The manager who takes a few mornings to work on the business may realize options to save on input costs, reevaluate enterprises, or find additional marketing opportunities that generate future returns to the business. Alternatively, one could ask, “how much would I be willing to pay to have someone do the WOTB work for me?”. The hired party may very well be a professional with a pretty steep per hour rate!

Back to the adage: hard work in the business is crucial; but the smart work, or the work on the business is that which really moves businesses forward. Setting time aside a few mornings each week for WOTB work has been well-documented to improve business outcomes.

If you are interested in doing some WOTB work, please join us at our next grain marketing meeting in which Ag Agents and other industry professionals discuss marketing strategies, risk management options, and market trends. To learn more, please visit <https://extension.umd.edu/locations/frederick-county> or contact me directly at mtownsen@umd.edu.

Mark Townsend is an Ag Agent Associate with the Frederick County Extension Office. His areas of focus are agronomy and soil health. Mark can be reached at 301-600-3578 or mtownsen@umd.edu. This institution is an equal opportunity provider.