

# Changing industries and shifting gears

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## Abstract

Changing from being a self-employed private practice veterinarian to working as a consultant for a large corporation requires self-awareness in what you like, dislike, excel at and require more training for. Audits on different facets of a dairy provide individuals the opportunity to use their brain more than their bodies; however, implementing consulting into a practice model is going to differ based on the clientele, the veterinarian and the interests of that veterinarian. Total mixed ration (TMR), parlor, heat, calf and data audits are all ways in which veterinarians can become more involved in a consulting role on the dairy and a valued team member. There are advantages and disadvantages to working in industry and an individual must weigh those options to decide what works best for them. In the end, the dairy industry and the veterinary profession are changing, and we must evolve with the needs of the clients and customers we serve if we are going to continue to be a valued member of the team.

**Key words:** consulting, audits, industry

A veterinarian's state of mind has great determination on where they are at and where they want to be in their career. The excitement of starting something new, but not yet being good at the task is quite different than being an expert and hating every minute. When a person shifts between these different states, they often pass through another state where they are good and excited about doing what they are doing, but have not yet fallen trap to detesting the task and therefore being destructive with said task. The motivation to change industries and shift gears to a consulting role has taken self-reflection. However, without having the experiences that I did as a practicing veterinarian, I would not have the knowledge, skill set or reputation to excel in a consulting role.

So, what is "consulting"? It is a universally used term that can mean many different things to different people. And there are several ways to go about being a consultant. As in private practice, there is the ability and the opportunity to start your own business. However, in my case, I chose to work for a company, where I had a team to work with, financial security and a little bit of structure. Within this role, this company had several veterinarians and PhDs already on the team that were supplying technical service to customers who purchased or used our feed additive product. The other part of working for a company that sells a product does include being knowledgeable on the product and helping the sales team in selling. However, depending on the company and what their team model is, there is often a fantastic opportunity to still use the critical thinking skills that veterinarians excel at, all while still being on farm. Within Diamond V, the support that is frequently provided by the technical team is in performing several types of audits on farm. These include the Diamond V TMR Audit™ as well as parlor, calf, heat and data audits. Each of these audits requires different equipment and resources.

## TMR audits

The Diamond V TMR Audit is looking at 11 distinct factors regarding feed storage and preparation, mixing and delivery of the TMR, ingredient variation and shrink, utilization of labor and resources, data analysis and safety within the feeding enterprise of the dairy. We often think that the ration that formulated by the nutritionist is the same ration that the cows see once it is delivered. However, there are several areas where issues can arise that actually make 4 different rations: the ration formulated, the ration mixed, the ration that is delivered to the cow, and finally the ration that the cow actually consumes. In performing a TMR audit, we are evaluating several critical control points in this part of the enterprise including the levelness of the mixer wagon on the frame and when it is being loaded, the timing and overall wear on the augers, kicker plates, scoops, sweeps and rotations per minute. If there is hay being processed, we are evaluating how that hay is processed. During the actual making of the TMR, we evaluate the order of ingredients, position during loading, distribution of any liquids being added and the final mix time of the ration. After the process is observed, we collect 10 evenly spaced samples down the feed bunk and shake them out using a Penn State Shaker Box. The information is then added to a spreadsheet where we calculate the coefficient of variation of the 10 samples. When the coefficient of variation is under 3%, we know we have a well-mixed and delivered ration.

Along with sampling the feed, other equipment that we use to evaluate the feeding enterprise include drones to get a bird's-eye view of how the wagon is operating and time-lapse cameras to evaluate feed push-ups, feed distribution and cow behavior. At every point along the way, we are watching for opportunities to improve the safety of the employees on the farm and around the equipment. After all the information is collected, a report is given back to the appropriate people on the farm.

## Parlor audits

Another area that provides opportunities to the dairy is in the milking parlor. When performing parlor audits, we use VaDias, Tri-Scans and a tablet. Parlor audits are an opportunity for us to evaluate the equipment, the people in the parlor as well as in the barns, the cows, and their environment, as well as any records that the farm has regarding milk quality. Although we do not perform a full National Mastitis Council Audit, we will evaluate vacuum levels, pulsation and some air capacity reserve. While in the parlor, we are evaluating milking procedures, timing, cattle handling, hygiene, teat-end condition and strip yields. And just like the TMR Audit, we compile all collected information and report back to the management team.

## Heat audits

During heat audits we are evaluating the fan and sprinkler settings on the dairy and where there are areas of heat stress that need to be addressed. Using Kestrel wind meters and FLIR heat cameras, we can evaluate the environment in the barns to provide information on areas of improvement.

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## Calf audits

Calf audits start in the maternity pen and follow that calf throughout its first year of life. It includes the feeding, cleaning, housing and growth of the youngstock as well as the hygiene of the feeding equipment. As in the heat audits, there is always going to be an aspect of animal welfare that needs to be evaluated. Veterinarians are certainly qualified to be the expert on how we are raising and caring for not only our youngstock, but our adult animals as well.

## Record audits

With any of the aforementioned audits, there is an opportunity to evaluate the records that correspond to that particular enterprise of the dairy as well as the potential for one area to be affecting another on the dairy. Practicing veterinarians are used to evaluating reproductive records, and there are some who excel at critically evaluating all aspects of the dairy using the records that the farm has. The advantage of being a consultant, is that there seems to be more time for a deeper analysis. Analyzing records of a dairy allow us to evaluate any historical data that is present, any areas of concern and any prominent trends that can be seen. This does take familiarity with several record keeping systems and time.

## Opportunities, challenges, advantages and disadvantages

Being a veterinary consultant for industry certainly has some opportunities and challenges. However, whether you view an issue as a problem or opportunity is again up to your mindset. Rather than being on the farm week after week performing herd checks or treating sick cows, a consultant may only be on the farm once a year or if lucky, quarterly. This allows the consultant to have fresh eyes, but it also is an evaluation of a snapshot in time. There are many times when employees know someone is coming to watch them mix feed, or milk cows, and they do everything perfectly. With enough time, usually they go back to their normal habits and routines. But, realizing that you are only evaluating things on that day needs to be remembered.

Often being a valued team member comes from the relationship that has been built. Providing value to a dairy does require having knowledge of what is actually happening on the dairy, but also bringing in outside information that the owners and management team sees as relevant. The smart owners and managers know that nothing is “free” in this world, including a consultant. However, as an outside consultant, it is important that you maintain the relationships with the veterinarians and nutritionists that are there every week or every month. As an industry, we have undervalued ourselves by being only an arm, or a means to purchasing drugs. Every single veterinarian has the capability to use their training to further advance the dairy or beef industry in a way outside of emergency services and pharmaceutical sales. Building the relationships with owners and management teams, putting in the effort to show that you care or want to be involved is critical to being brought on as a valued team member.

Shifting from practice ownership and practicing veterinarian to a consulting veterinarian that works for a large corporation certainly has advantages and disadvantages. There is much more flexibility than I experienced in private practice. I am using my brain far more than using and abusing my body, and I get to travel all over the country and world to see diverse ways of dairy farming. However, there is a significant amount of travel involved and more often than not, I get introduced as someone who “used to be a vet.” No, they do not take away your education or degree when you become an industry consultant, but often times the fact that you are no longer getting your boots dirty everyday changes how you are perceived. This is where having the prior practical experience for a number of years works to my advantage. Finally working for a large corporation is vastly different than self-employment. Making changes is slow, there are different policies and procedures that need to be followed and there are certainly politics involved. However, evaluating what you can and cannot live with, that self-awareness, is going to determine whether or not you will be happy.

Building consulting into a practice model is going to depend on a variety of factors. What are your clients’ needs? What do you like or dislike doing? Parlor audits are not a weekly or monthly need. Heat audits can be seasonal. Can you be proficient at something you are only doing once or twice a year? There is different knowledge and skill sets needed to perform some of these audits, than the skill sets needed for everyday private practice. And the most challenging aspect is the time that it takes. The audits that I do easily take up to 7 hours with the report writing included. Do you have that kind of time to dedicate or are you running around putting out the fires of displaced abomasums and calvings? And then finally how are you going to bill for that time? Hourly, per audit or retainer basis? How do your clients perceive the value for which they are paying?

As the dairy industry and the veterinary profession continue to consolidate, finding a seat at the table is going to require a different mindset. As a profession we are a valued member of society. How can we increase the value to our producers and managers to ensure we still have a seat at that table for ourselves and the next generation? Finally, we need to remember that 98% of cow problems are people problems. We cannot try to fix all the issues on a dairy if we are not willing to accept that there is human attached to most of these problems.

