

Characteristics of Successful Poultry Growers



Not everyone can or should be a contract poultry grower. Some folks just aren't cut out for the kind of lifestyle it requires, while others excel. Farming has always been a tough way to make a living; and maybe that's why less than 2 percent of the U.S. population farms today. Poultry farming is no different.

Successful poultry growers understand and accept that it is not an easy lifestyle for several reasons. 1) To be successful, your day starts early, and it ends late. You literally must be "up with the chickens." 2) It's 7 days a week and 24 hours a day. The birds don't care if it is Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, your anniversary, the kids' soccer or baseball game, or the weekend. If there are birds on the farm, they require constant attention. 3) Poultry houses are expensive to build. A four-house broiler farm today is easily over \$1 million, and an eight-house farm is easily over \$2 million. This is for just the poultry houses and equipment. It does not include the cost of land. 4) Poultry farming involves the whole family and is not a solitary occupation. If one spouse is a farmer, then the whole family must be involved in farming in order to help when one is sick or out of town.

However, successful poultry growers also understand that, with hard work and attention to details, their chosen lifestyle can be rewarding, both personally and financially. Every grower wants to be successful, but not every grower is successful. So what are the characteristics it takes to be a successful contract poultry grower? What separates the successful from the not-so-successful? We occasionally get that question when an individual who has never raised poultry before builds a poultry farm or buys an existing farm.

But let's say an entire new complex or division is being built and there are dozens of growers asking that same question all at once. How can Extension help all these new growers understand what it takes to successfully navigate the new path they are about to take? Here are eight characteristics we have observed that all successful poultry growers tend to have in common. Except for number 1, they are in no particular order. Number 1 is number 1 for a reason—without it, you won't be very good at most of the others.

1. Strong Work Ethic

Poultry farming is not easy work. To some degree, you are your own boss and you can decide when you want to start and finish your day in the poultry houses. However, successful growers see their birds early (5–6 a.m.) and see them late (9–10 p.m.). They also see them multiple times in between.

Raising poultry is not a 9 to 5 job. You will not be successful as a poultry grower working a 9 to 5 schedule. Rest assured that something is always happening in one house or the other that requires your attention. The quicker you address that issue and put things right again, the more successful you will be.

You do not need to "live" in your poultry houses. However, you do need to start early and check for any issues that may have developed overnight and address those issues quickly. You also need to check the flock late and, if there are issues, address them at that time. A water leak or a feed line not working at 9 p.m. needs to be fixed at 9 p.m., not the next morning. Too much of an "I'll fix that later" attitude can put you out of business. A strong work ethic is a major difference between successful and not-so-successful growers.

2. Willingness to Spend Time in the Poultry House

Do not let the controller grow the birds! Too many growers put too much faith in their controller and expect the controller to grow the birds. However, the controller is a tool—you are the grower! Successful growers are very good at understanding their birds, their equipment, and their individual houses.

As mentioned earlier, you don't need to "live" in your poultry houses, but you do need to spend enough time there to understand everything. First and foremost, you must understand what your birds are telling you. Yes, your birds are telling you many things, and, therefore, you must learn to speak their language as quickly as possible.

The same spiel applies for both new poultry growers and college students who are poultry science majors: a 5-gallon bucket is the best friend you have in the chicken business. You should take that 5-gallon bucket into the

poultry house, turn it upside down and sit on it, and watch your birds and learn how they act at different times of the day and under different conditions at different ages. How do birds respond when they are too hot or cold, feel a draft (your birds do not like drafts), or are out of feed and/or water?

It's best to never run out of feed or water, but if you grow birds long enough, it's bound to happen at some point. Feed mills break down and well pumps go out. That's just part of life on the farm—usually the part everyone forgot to mention to you. It's also important to know how birds behave when everything is fine. If you watch them long enough, you will know how they react to different situations and recognize when something isn't right. They will tell you when they aren't happy; you just have to learn how to understand their language.

Also be aware that, even though your houses may all be lined up side-by-side, every house will act differently, even though you may have the same program in every controller. Each house will have its own unique way of ventilating, heating, and cooling. You must learn how each house differs from all the others and adjust your settings for each house based on the characteristics of that house.

3. Hunger to Be the Best

Successful growers are always trying to learn new information, find better ways to do things, and excel at what they do. They quiz their service tech for new information and about what's going on in the poultry world. They read any information their integrator puts out as well as any Extension publications related to poultry production and management.

Most integrators have grower meetings at least once a year where they bring their growers together and update them on the latest happenings, invite speakers to discuss important topics, present disease and biosecurity updates, and provide information to help ensure their growers' success. Even though these grower meetings mean leaving the farm, which, as a general rule, successful growers rarely like to do, they are important in order to stay up-to-date, and they let the integrator know, by your presence, that you want to learn all you can and do the best job possible.

Successful growers are always asking questions of their service tech, complex manager, integrator veterinarian, Extension personnel, and other growers. Again, they have a strong work ethic, a passion to learn new things, and a desire to be a better grower.

4. Good Water Quality (in an NAE World)

Good water is not a personal trait or characteristic, but it is critical to be a successful grower in today's poultry-growing environment. There was a time when we really didn't think too much about water if it was available when the birds wanted a drink, or when we needed to run the cool cells. We drilled our wells, plumbed everything in, turned it on, and never thought anymore about it.

The no antibiotics ever (NAE) programs that many integrators are running today (at least to some extent) means those days of not caring about our water are long gone, and farm water quality is now a huge concern. Numerous issues, such as mineral content, bacterial load, and pH, can affect the quality of water our birds are drinking and, therefore, the health of our flocks.

In the past, the small amount of antibiotic help birds received at the hatchery and in the feed may have hidden many water-quality issues. In the NAE world of today, however, with antibiotics removed from the hatchery and the feed, water quality is playing a much bigger role in gut health than ever before.

Successful growers know what's in their water and treat it, if necessary. Any grower having performance issues not related to management (gut sloughing, feed passage, loose droppings, wet floors, high feed conversions, and low weight gains) should have their water tested, and if necessary, treated. In many cases, poor water quality can be fixed; however, you must know what's wrong before you can fix it.

5. Flexibility to Switch to NAE Production

While some growers have been raising NAE birds for a while now, for many growers, this is something they have had to learn recently or are still in the process of learning. Raising NAE birds means learning how to grow birds all over again.

What was considered "clean" before NAE and what is considered "clean" within an NAE program are two different things. NAE programs require that we go back to basics and not cut corners that a little antibiotic help allowed us to get away with in the past. Consumers are putting pressure on retailers to provide antibiotic-free products, and retailers are passing this pressure on to poultry integrators.

Taking antibiotics out of the hatchery and out of the feed means that poultry growers (and poultry integrators) must ratchet up their management practices. Management practices must focus greater attention on cleanliness and sanitation at all levels of production (pullet farms, broiler

breeder farms, egg packs, hatcheries, feed mills, broiler farms, and processing plants). Stress levels on NAE birds must be kept to a minimum to help them better resist disease challenges.

Everything now must be done a little better and at a higher level of performance for NAE programs to be successful. Successful growers have the flexibility to reach this higher level of management and maintain their performance.

6. Biosecurity Awareness

Successful growers understand that one breach in biosecurity could mean the difference between a healthy flock and a disaster like the 2014–15 U.S. avian influenza outbreak. They recognize the importance that biosecurity plays in keeping the nation's poultry flocks safe. Successful growers have biosecurity protocols in place on their farms, and they enforce them. They know who comes and goes on their farms and why.

Transmitting disease could be as easy as going to the poultry supply store to purchase a feed line motor. Good growers know to never go to the feed store, poultry supply store, café, co-op, or any other location other poultry growers may frequent without changing clothes and boots before checking on their birds when they return home. The risk of carrying something back to the farm is too great to take chances.

Footbaths at poultry house entrance doors are a requirement for commercial growers these days. Successful growers change the disinfectant in these footbaths on a regular basis to keep the disinfectant fresh and effective.

Sign-in logs are another way that good growers keep track of traffic on their farms. It is impossible to be too careful with biosecurity in today's production environment. Successful growers do not see biosecurity as a chore; they recognize it as a necessary precaution to protect their flock, their farm, and their way of life.

7. Ability to Manage Litter and Air Quality

Litter quality and air quality go hand in hand in the poultry house. High ammonia levels, often present with built-up litter, are a serious health threat to the flock, making birds susceptible to respiratory infections and eye damage, including blindness.

Unfortunately, growers often become desensitized to the smell of ammonia over time and may have higher levels in the house than they realize. This can be detrimental to the health of the flock. There are handheld ammonia sensors available for \$400–\$500 that many service techs and some growers now carry to accurately measure ammonia.

Humidity is another culprit in the poultry house. A humidity level somewhere between 50 percent and 70 percent seems to work best. Humidity levels less than 50 percent for long periods can result in high dust levels in the house as the litter becomes too dry. Humidity levels higher than 70 percent for long periods cause wet floors and caked litter, as the litter acts as a sponge and becomes saturated by the high humidity in the air. Wet litter is an animal welfare issue and results in more ammonia, making a bad situation worse. In addition, the number of microbes and disease-causing organisms in the litter increases as humidity and wet litter increase, thereby increasing the threat of disease in the flock.

Successful growers understand that one of the best things you can give your birds is more air. It may cost a little more gas in the winter to ventilate, but the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages.

8. Strong Support Group

There will likely be times when you are not able to look after the farm. If you are called out of town or are sick for a day or two, whose responsibility is it to care for the birds? Successful growers have a network of family and/or friends that can be relied on to look after things in the event of an emergency or other unforeseen circumstance.

Again, poultry farming is not a solitary occupation. It's important to have backup that you can call on when needed. You may not need these folks very often, but when you do need them, it's critical to have them, and it's comforting to know that they are willing and able to assist you if needed.

If you expect the unexpected, you will always have a game plan ready. Successful growers rarely get caught off guard. They have thought through most situations and have a plan and people in place to address those situations if necessary.

These are some of the characteristics we believe all successful poultry growers have in common. One additional characteristic that is beneficial to have is some common-sense repair skills. While you do not have to be mechanically inclined to be a successful grower, having some fix-it skills can come in handy and save money.

For example, if you can change out a feed line or fan motor, repair a leaky water line, swap out a cool cell pump motor, or reconnect a feed auger to the shaft on the feed line motor, you can save yourself downtime, lost performance, and the expense of hiring repair personnel. Unfortunately, if you need to call repair personnel, it may be several hours before they can get to you. Lost performance when your birds are without feed and/or water and you're waiting on repair folks is performance you will never get back. Consider anything you can fix yourself as money in your pocket.

Summary

Contract poultry production is not for everyone. It's hard work that lasts 24/7 for weeks or months at a time, depending on how long each flock is on the farm. However, it is also rewarding and fulfilling work for thousands of families across the country, and it has allowed many small farmers to make their living from the land and raise their families in the manner they have chosen.

Help is available to make every grower as successful as possible. Ask questions and take advantage of this help from service techs, broiler and breeder/hatchery managers, complex/division managers, integrator veterinarians, Extension personnel, and others. You have a lot invested in your farm, and everyone wants you to succeed.

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