



The Future of Agribusiness: Solving Tomorrow's Problems Today

JM Search examines the trends shaping the future of agriculture—and how we can prepare today to fill tomorrow's talent gaps.

The agribusiness finds itself at an inflection point. While it may lag behind most other mature fields in terms of technology adoption, agriculture represents a golden opportunity to convert more data into information than just about any other industry.

Capitalizing on this wealth of information won't be easy, as the insular nature of agriculture can lead to the same kinds of people asking the same questions year after year. Who can drive the future of agribusiness forward?

We spoke with some of the top minds in agribusiness today to determine what tomorrow's agribusiness leadership will need to succeed. According to them, the ideal candidates will be able to stand at the center of a Venn diagram that comprises three themed circles:

- Technology
- Sustainability
- Stakeholder Engagement

These employees will understand Big Tech and how to convert data into information, ultimately translating those findings into terms that are valuable to farmers and consumers alike—and STEM-focused professionals seeking sustainable, mission-based careers will be rewarded.

Technology

Few industries have more data compounded each and every year than ag. After generations of diligent record-keeping on farms, there exists an abundance of data that can now be mined to shape the farming practices and innovative products of the future. A number of issues facing farmers—including pest control, resource management, and timing of crops—can be streamlined and improved by migrating data from analog silos to new digital platforms.

Data also enables greater transparency, which leads to better ways for buyers and sellers to engage in the marketplace, compare prices, and review suppliers. Rooster.com, an online marketplace for farmers developed in 2000, can be viewed as a prototypical example of this idea. By properly funneling data through technology, an industry known for being fragmented can benefit from streamlined purchasing decisions.

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Jim Borel, an experienced agriculture executive who currently serves on the board of Neogen Corporation, helped build Rooster.com and has seen firsthand how tech can revolutionize the industry. According to him, a successful marriage between ag and tech depends on fresh perspectives.

"It's always helpful in agriculture to have grown up in the industry," Borel explains. "But with changing expectations and newer technologies impacting the space, it's more important for talent to understand tech. They don't necessarily need a farming background; as long as they appreciate agriculture and are willing to learn and adapt, they'll excel."

Combining bright STEM talent with an ocean of agricultural data has already led to brilliant results. Attracting the right talent can be a challenge, but ag companies that get it right are changing the game. For example, one organization uses plant-based materials to produce peroxides, bio-based products typically made with synthetic chemistries—all in an attempt to eliminate carbon-based products to curb emissions. Agribusiness truly represents a rare intersection of leading technology and a sustainable mission.

Sustainable Enterprise

Young people joining the workforce today want to be proud of where they work. They are often in search of a mission-based culture. Having grown up with the threat of climate change lingering in the background, the next generation of talent will find myriad opportunities to create a better tomorrow in the field of agriculture, from farming practices that sequester carbon from the atmosphere to the development of hybrid produce that thrives on less water and fewer pesticides.

That's not to say that the future of sustainable ag will happen overnight. Jim Borel cites a key hurdle that, while difficult, will ultimately pave the way for even more environmentally friendly innovations. Where once the singular goal in agriculture was the production of safe, affordable food, that sentiment is changing in favor of more sustainable options that benefit the environment.

"The next generation wants less meat and more vegetable-based proteins, which in many ways goes against the current system," Borel says. "It will take time to steer the industry in that direction, but it creates opportunities for new companies and start-ups to create more sustainable products."

What the next generation of ag talent may be surprised to learn is that sustainability directly factors into what farmers have done for centuries. Before it had a name or was fashionable, farmers trained their focus on leaving the Earth in better shape than they found it. It's what they do year in and year out. Taking stewardship of their land very seriously, farmers are fueled by an innate understanding that if they destroy their land for one big yield, they've won a small battle only to lose a very costly war.

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- **Jim Borel**, *Board Member, Neogen Corporation*

By sharing this mission more openly with the public, agriculture may have an easier time attracting environmentally conscious tech talent into the fold.

"The most talented young people have nothing but choices in terms of career path," says John Buckley, CEO at Wilbur-Ellis. "To bring them over to ag, you have to attract them with the difference they'll be making in the world."

Stakeholder Engagement

Agriculture touches the entire food value chain. As you think about food production, non-GMO offerings, clean ingredients, and so many other consumer-driven trends, ag sits at the very center of that proverbial plate.

"We're seeing record-high levels of interest in ESG in the marketplace," says Tim Hassinger, board member of Intelinair. "The customer now cares about the history of the food they are eating and if that food is sustainably grown, whether employees and farmers are treated fairly, and many other factors. Today's talent wants to know that they're part of a culture that cares about these issues, too."

With an entire population of people growing more accustomed to examining every ingredient on the label, tomorrow's ag professionals need to know how to deliver. They must also be able to synthesize consumer desires and scientific data in a way that will resonate with farmers. In other words, there's a growing market premium on STEM PhDs who possess high-level soft skills, a combination that can be hard to come by.

Securing the Right Talent

We've identified the necessary talent. So how do we channel it into agriculture to help innovate the industry? Many experts believe there needs to be an immersion period to help newcomers become better acquainted. The ag industry is a unique sector with a high rate of turnover for the uninitiated. As previously mentioned, if you haven't grown up in it, it's hard to understand what it means to be in the business. With so many farms handed down from generation to generation, it's easy for the entire industry to remain insular, with critical knowledge remaining in the family silo.

Properly immersing new ag hires gives them access to information that might otherwise seem arcane. Agribusiness runs on massive amounts of data, which is used to create logistics networks, financial instruments, and much more. With this much complexity, it's imperative for newcomers to fully understand the end-to-end value chain from a macro level as well as how the pieces integrate from a more granular level.

Other industries allow for multiple product life cycles, but in agribusiness, if you're fortunate to be in it for multiple decades, that still only equates to one crop cycle per year. If you have a bad crop or bad yield, you put a farm in peril. Incoming talent with a tech focus should be made aware of this.

"You've only got 40 chances over a farm's life cycle, so you must be thoughtful on how you do things," says Jim Borel. "Farmers take fewer risks to start but are willing to adopt new hybrids and data tools as others have success with them. As the confidence grows, they will grow the technology."

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Outside talent can help revolutionize ag, but there's a credibility gap that keeps outsiders out. Getting people immersed quickly can help. By spending time on farms, around grain elevators, exposed to supply chains and R&D, and more, outsiders can gain an understanding on how this value system works from start to finish.

"We have to account for talent with different backgrounds," says Kerry Preete, former EVP and CSO at Monsanto. "We have to train today's tech talent as if they are the farmer—only then can they understand the supply chain and how to innovate products. They need to be immersed in industry knowledge before they can prove their ideas."

When searching for tomorrow's ideal ag professional—one who stands at the intersection of tech, sustainability, and stakeholder engagement—the right searchfirm can add value by thinking proactively. Agribusiness leaders can work with these firms to garner ideas from other industries that may yield the necessary characteristics. For example, professionals in the chemical or mining industries share a similar mindset with many in ag, but their day-to-day operations differ just enough to provide a new perspective. By finding these diverse experts who share similar traits, tomorrow's ag industry can benefit from an entirely new slate of people who spur new ideas through differing points of view.

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