

THE LAST WORD

✦ By Liz Muller, CEO, Herd-i



Image: Left to right, Brendan O'Connell, Joao Dorea & Liz Muller

“WE CAN ONLY DELIVER WORLD CLASS AGRITECH IF WE ARE GROWING WORLD CLASS TECH TALENT HERE IN NEW ZEALAND,,

A topic that is really close to my heart is creating a talent pipeline for agritech in New Zealand. Everyone knows that the primary production sector is the backbone of the New Zealand economy and we can only strengthen our international competitive advantage in food and fibre exporting if the sector is enabled by a world-class agritech sector. The reality is simple: “we can only deliver world class agritech if we are growing world class tech talent here in New Zealand”

My career (prior to Herd-i) was as a food technologist. New Zealand produces world-class food technologists, process engineers, agronomists, horticulturalists and vets to meet the demand that our leading primary sector exporters have for people with the knowledge and skills required to ensure the sector constantly innovates to keep our competitive advantage.

There is no doubt that New Zealand is developing world class software engineers, but there is more that can be done to ensure these smart young people are aware of the opportunities in the AgriTech sector and that they are able to bring sound skills and knowledge about the dynamics of food production and processing systems into the workforce with them.

That is why I sat down with Brendan O'Connell, CEO of AgriTechNZ. I wanted to chat with him about what more we can do as an industry, what universities could do and even what role government might play to make sure New Zealand is home-growing the talent we need to lead us into the future of tech-enabled food production.

Brendan framed agritech succinctly: “In reality, there is no such thing as the agritech sector,” he said. “There’s an agriculture sector, and there’s a technology sector... and there’s an overlap between those two sectors.” Agritech is at the crossover of those two well-established industries - and that overlap is becoming more central to ensuring New Zealand’s future economic success.

For me, this comes back to a simple truth: agriculture has defined who we are as a country - it is how we define ourselves as a nation and how the markets that matter define us. The world expects New Zealand to produce food well; to be efficient at it, to be sustainable in our practices; to have world class biosecurity and animal welfare controls and to be constantly innovating. We should celebrate that at both consumer level and at the government level and keep challenging ourselves to continuously improve and to set the standards for what world class looks like.

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One of the discussion points we most enjoyed during our conversation was the opportunity that AgriTech presents to New Zealand’s GDP because of its infinite scale potential. Productive agricultural and horticultural land is finite. Sustainable use of the land for production, which generates revenue, is finite. Brendan noted, “There is a significant opportunity not only to adopt technology to be better at food production here within New Zealand, but to develop technologies that are relevant and transferable to help improve food production globally”.

Over the last few years, New Zealand has seen the emergence of several new companies who are offering technologies to improve productivity and animal health, saving time and costs as well as reduce environmental impacts. All of these technologies have potential application in international farming systems - helping to further strengthen New Zealand’s well-established reputation and impact. And potentially bringing home the bacon for New Zealand in the form of a multi-billion-dollar export sector.

Brendan and I spoke about people - the critical requirement for a talent pipeline - and where the next wave of agritech talent could come from. I would like to see more kiwi farming kids entering the sector, giving companies like Herd-i more options to recruit developers with a strong understanding of and connection to the ag sector. Brendan’s view was clear: there are multiple pathways. If you grow up with a farming background there are pathways into “doing some really interesting work by getting into technology that’s applied to agriculture.”

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But equally, he said, “even if you don’t come from a farming background, and you want some of the most challenging problems happening on this planet right now agritech is the place to do it, because when you’re working with natural biological systems, it doesn’t get more complex, challenging or rewarding than that.”

So ensuring the future talent is available for the sector all starts with creating awareness amongst the people who matter. Brendan put it plainly “we need to make sure people making career choices – at school, at university, or later in their careers – know that the agritech sector is absolute core.” If people don’t know about the opportunity they can’t choose it and if they can’t see the opportunity, they won’t choose it.

I am also a strong advocate for influencing the influencers. Mum’s still play a key role in the selection of school subjects and preparation for future career pathways. The food technology sector did this really well once upon a time.

In the Bay of Plenty and Hawkes Bay, the local food industry would have career opportunity open days – busing year 10 and 11 kids and their mums (and this was the key) around the local food processing businesses for a “show and taste” where food tech graduates would talk about their jobs.

Universities have an important role too in promoting the crossover between the conventionally siloed ag and hort science courses and the worlds of software engineering, automation, data and AI. The time has come to blend more of these courses because the sector opportunities are so big and so important for New Zealand. Brendan noted that New Zealand’s universities are well placed to building these multidisciplinary learning pathways.

We also touched on something that’s easy to forget: agritech, like agriculture, can’t be faked. Brendan’s line stuck with me: “Agritech is like agriculture. You reap what you sow. You can’t fake it... it takes real work and can take seasons to make impactful changes in a farming system.”

He also made the point that it’s “very rewarding when you get it right.”

My takeaway is simple: the talent pipeline won’t just happen because we hope it will, or because there are people chatting about it. If we want agritech to help define our future, “we” need to make career options visible and attractive, create the right qualifications pathways, and do a better job of showing young kiwi (farming) kids that this is purposeful work on genuinely challenging and rewarding problems. Having an organisation like AgriTechNZ is a great start and I have vowed to Brendan to keep having this conversation with the others in the sector who can help create some real change.

Thank you to Brendan for your time and insightful perspective.

– Liz Muller, CEO of Herd-i