

Early Career Members

Agronomy Careers in Industry: Panelists Share their Career Path and Provide Valuable Advice

When you think about jobs in agronomy, what is the first thought that comes to mind? A crop consultant walking fields, scouting for insects and diseases, taking soil samples, and making recommendations to farmers? It could be that. But, wow have things changed. Today, agronomy offers endless opportunities.

I recently had the chance to sit down with a panel of industry professionals to discuss their exciting careers in agriculture, how they got where they are today, and what advice they have for recent graduates. They all agree the job outlook for agriculture graduates looks very promising!

I was joined by a terrific panel: David Kosztyo, Area Manager for DuPont Pioneer; Mike Dillon, Northeast U.S. Sales Manager for DuPont Pioneer; Mark Riehl, Customer Agronomist for Mycogen Seeds; Joyce Soltis, Sales Rep for Syngenta; Michael Bittel, Senior Vice President/General Manager for King Arthur Flour; and Cliff Love, General Manager of Carolina-Eastern Vail (an independent farm retailer).

All of the panelists have at least a bachelor's degree, and most of them got started in the ag industry directly out of college, except for Mike Dillon and Michael Bittel. Mike started in the U.S. Army as a way to pay for college, learning valuable teamwork and leadership skills along the way, and Michael started in an administrative trainee program for Quad/Graphics, gaining essential business skills. Both David and Cliff were fortunate to be able to start in management trainee programs for ag retailers, allowing a transition period to learn the skills of the job before being given full responsibilities. Many companies still offer such programs, although it might not be titled as such. Often companies will invest in their entry-level employees and have them shadow experienced reps, as well as give them a project to complete during their training phase.

As Area Manager for DuPont Pioneer, David Kosztyo manages sales and business activities in his territory, oversee-



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ing a group of area sales reps and sales agency teams in New York and New England to increase unit sales. He worked hard to get there, having 18 years with Pioneer and starting as a sales rep himself—working in the countryside promoting his products to farmers and his sales agencies, walking fields with customers, and developing grower meetings.

One step above David is Mike Dillon, who oversees all field sales activities of employees, independent sales reps, and dealers in 15 states. Mike also worked his way up from field agronomist to area manager before moving to their Northeast headquarters. David chooses to keep his family in one location, whereas Mike's promotion required flexibility in geography.



Mark Riehl is a customer agronomist, which means he is an expert in agronomy and Mycogen's seed lineup. He spends more time out in the field, working directly with customers and sales reps to help them understand where to place each hybrid and how to set it up for success. He also gets to act as a detective when crops aren't growing right. While often blamed on the seed, 99% of the time it is caused by something else (poor fertility, low pH, planting depth, etc.). Mark says his "office is working in the fields, elevators, and farms in the countryside" and he "personally can't think of another job with a better office or business suit!"

Joyce Soltis has just retired after 30+ years with what started as Ciba-Geigy, and then became Novartis, and finally Syngenta. She spent her entire career as a sales rep and wouldn't have it any other way. She enjoys the cycles of the seasons, which keep things exciting; in the winter—planning, forecasting, and presentations; in the spring—field visits, recommendations, and training on product handling; in the summer and fall—harvest and product evaluations and always visits with customers. Joyce says, "My job is more than selling products. It is all about building relationships and

Congressional Science Fellowship—spends one year in Washington, DC, applying their professional and scientific expertise as special assistants on the staffs of members of Congress or congressional committees.

Many **Sections, Communities, and Divisions** also sponsor topic-specific competitions and awards for graduate students at the Annual Meetings (see the Annual Meetings website at acsmeetings.org).

Undergrads—Need Money for School?

Undergrads: Check out these 2013 scholarships. All nominations are due 9 Apr. 2013. Explore the awards sites¹ for more information.

Hank Beachell Future Leader Scholarship—for students participating in activities that enhance their university studies: *two awards at \$4,000*.

J. Fielding Reed Scholarship—for students pursuing a career in soil or plant sciences: *\$1,000*.

Cross-Cultural Experience Program—for students participating in study-abroad programs: *two awards at \$2,500*.

Frank D. Keim Graduate Fellowship—for undergraduate student recipients of the National Student Recognition Program pursuing a graduate degree: *\$1,000*.

Hubert J. Byrd Sr. Scholarship—for undergraduate students pursuing careers as professional consulting soil scientists: *two awards at \$1,000*.

U.S. Borlaug Graduate Research Grant

The U.S. Borlaug Fellows in Global Food Security graduate research grant supports exceptional graduate students who are interested in developing a component of their graduate research in a developing country setting and in collaboration with a mentor from an International Agricultural Research Center (IARC) or a qualifying National Agricultural Research System (NARS) unit. U.S. citizenship is required, and applicants must be enrolled in an accredited U.S. graduate program at the time of application. **Application deadline: 1 Apr. 2013.**

Applications are available at www.purdue.edu/discoverypark/food/borlaugfellows. Questions may be sent to borlaugfellows@purdue.edu.

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trust and being a real partner for our customers,” something the entire panel agreed with.

Michael Bittel has a unique job that would not come to mind very easily. Part of his job is to work with fellow employees in operations and sales “to make and sell the best flour in the world.” The most exciting part of his job is that he gets to travel all over the country to visit farmers and purchase their wheat.

Cliff Love oversees millions of dollars’ worth of products and equipment and all of the people who handle it. He grew up on a small dairy farm in Pennsylvania and went to school for dairy husbandry. Along the way, his eyes were opened to the many opportunities in agriculture, and upon graduation, he started as a manager trainee for Agway in a suburban market, selling lawn and garden supplies. With no agronomy background, his big switch to managing an agronomy supply business required a lot of self-studying, acquiring both his Certified Crop Adviser (CCA) qualification and commercial driver’s license within two years. He now spends much of his time developing sales plans, coaching staff, overseeing equipment purchases, managing customer credit, exploring new products/services to offer, and developing relationships with suppliers.

Most panelists agreed that having your CCA certification is very beneficial, especially starting out, since it adds credibility to your role and requires you to keep learning. Before becoming certified, you need to have field experience—a good reason to use every summer to do an agriculture internship. Not only will you gain experience, but it can help you figure out if the job is something that you really want to do.

I recently spoke with Zach Hetterick, from Case IH, while at the American Farm Bureau Federation’s Annual Meeting in Nashville, TN. I was both surprised and delighted to hear that they have put an emphasis on hiring agronomists in the past few years. They realize that to build the best equipment, they need to understand the science of crop growth and physiology just as much as they understand mechanical engineering.

There are tremendous job opportunities for graduates in agriculture today. Jobs that are sales support roles (such as sales rep or customer agronomist) have starting salaries of \$45,000 or more in the Northeast and \$55,000 or more in the Midwest. You will also be supplied with a vehicle, laptop, and cell phone in most cases. With three to five years of experience and a proven record, you could be making \$85,000 or more and work your way up through management positions, technical specialist roles, finance, research, logistics, production, and more. “Sky’s the limit,” says Mike Dillon...as long as you have flexibility in geography.

Their biggest advice for getting there? Passion. Cliff Love never went to school for agronomy. Michael Bittel went from selling printing to selling flour. Joyce joined her company when it was an overwhelmingly male field. And Mike Dillon sums it up best: “You need a passion for ag and working with people.”

Do you think you have what it takes? If so, there are a lot of people wanting to talk to you.