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Tech talk

Jeff Bradshaw, CTO at Proagrica, offers insight on the impact tech and data has on the agricultural industry



Hi Jeff, could you give us an outline of your role at Proagrica, and explain the aims and operations of the company itself?

Jeff Bradshaw: I'm the chief technology officer at Proagrica, which means I oversee the technical aspects of the business that deliver and support our innovative products to market. My journey with Proagrica began when it acquired Adaptris, a business I founded back in 1998. Adaptris was set up to deliver integration products to the market and created a B2B network to facilitate electronic trading in agriculture. The network then scaled globally to meet the demands of agriculture businesses.

Proagrica's core aim is to help the industry increase productivity and efficiency through the efficient use of advanced data and analytics. Agriculture as a sector lags behind others when it comes to the adoption of technology, and that's currently leading to a loss in productivity and efficiency. Our goal as a business is to address that by building products and services that help our customers make strategic business decisions around trading, productivity and compliance, informed

by the advanced use of data and analytics.

What is your opinion on the way the agricultural industry – specifically, the fresh fruit and vegetable business – currently utilises data and technology?

JB: The sheer volume of data in the sector at the moment means keeping up and making efficient use of it is a major challenge. That's compounded even further when you couple it with the constant flow of new technologies released – next generation tractors, sensors, drones, and more. Put another way, a single tractor generates 360mb of data per day, if you combine that with all of the sensor, weather and other data, it can become overwhelming.

I think the agriculture industry is still in the early stages of leveraging big data and analytics, and the most common challenge we see is how to integrate this data in a way that allows a user to ask simple questions to gain useful insight. I have visited farmers who use sensors and quite advanced systems to look after their crops, but who have yet to link that data to gain insight into ways of improving their yield.

Breaking down the agricultural supply

chain piece by piece, is there any specific part of the chain that you feel is technologically ahead of the other?

JB: It's generally the larger manufacturers that are most advanced within the supply chain. It's got to be said though, as an industry, agriculture lags behind when it comes to capability. Those further down the stream, such as the smaller retailers, tend to possess limited IT capacity and a lack of support when trading electronically. The network for these supply chains is critical, since it levels the playing field and allows the smaller participants an opportunity to trade on a more equal footing.

We also have to be looking at the overall supply chain and the optimisation of it to help reduce returns of products and importantly today, waste.

Moving forward, how do you see this changing, or improving?

JB: Improved integration throughout the supply chain is the key way we can ensure we'll be able to deliver better value to all parts of the supply chain.

As we navigate our way through the current global pandemic, the driver of

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the change in our industry will be efficiency needs. It's vital to know what stock is available and ensure that it gets to the correct location. Naturally, this is going to drive further connectivity.

What other industries could the agricultural business take its lead from, and what are they doing that is different?

JB: Consumer packaged goods and component electronics manufacturing are great examples of two industries that have demonstrated good supply chain management. The component electronics industry in particular provides visibility on where components are manufactured and assembled, using just-in-time supply chains. Integration is core to ensuring that the factories run and produce the finished goods, from the initial order right through to the logistics and load planning.

Where do you see the agricultural supply chain being in ten years' time, in terms of its adoption of technology and use of data?

JB: I'd love to see the agricultural supply chain become substantially more integrated through efficient use of data. The entire industry will be able to plan, manage and execute the transport, logistics and provenance of food more effectively.

Consumers are much more in tune with what they are eating and want more information, and we are already seeing a desire from our customers for more integration along the supply chain. The farm to fork movement is growing globally. People now want to know more information about their food than ever before and an important way to achieve this is through transparent product information delivered through an integrated supply chain.

We're in the early stages of understanding the applicability and value that data can offer in supply chain integration and enhanced decision support. Agriculture is turning a significant tide, and it's exciting to be part of this data revolution that will see growers move towards increased productivity and profitability.

The more we learn from data, the more we can make informed decisions that will deliver global benefits, whether that be combating future animal and crop diseases or reducing our environmental footprint.

Proagrica recently launched an Omnichannel platform for agricultural retailers. What does this offer?

JB: At present, agriculture retailers have multiple channels to market at their disposal. While

agronomists are unquestionably at the heart of the retailer-to-grower relationship, working closely with them to create field plans and make product recommendations such as seed varieties and crop protection, they're not always in step with the store or any online experience offered by the retailer.

There's an inevitable disconnect between these different channels and the combination of in-person, telephone and email conversations that can result in an inconsistent customer experience. In turn, that can lead a grower to take advice and simply buy a product elsewhere. This fragmentation – and disconnected sales channels – results in lost revenue; it's very hard for the retailer to understand who their key customers are, whether their agronomists are servicing these key customers, and whether they're at risk of not being able to fulfil customer needs.

An omnichannel solution addresses this fragmentation since it gives greater visibility all round via a single portal that helps the retailer to better understand their customers and offer higher value to their key customers.