

WHAT CAN AGRICULTURE LEARN DURING COVID-19?

7 lessons for building a resilient farm business through technology

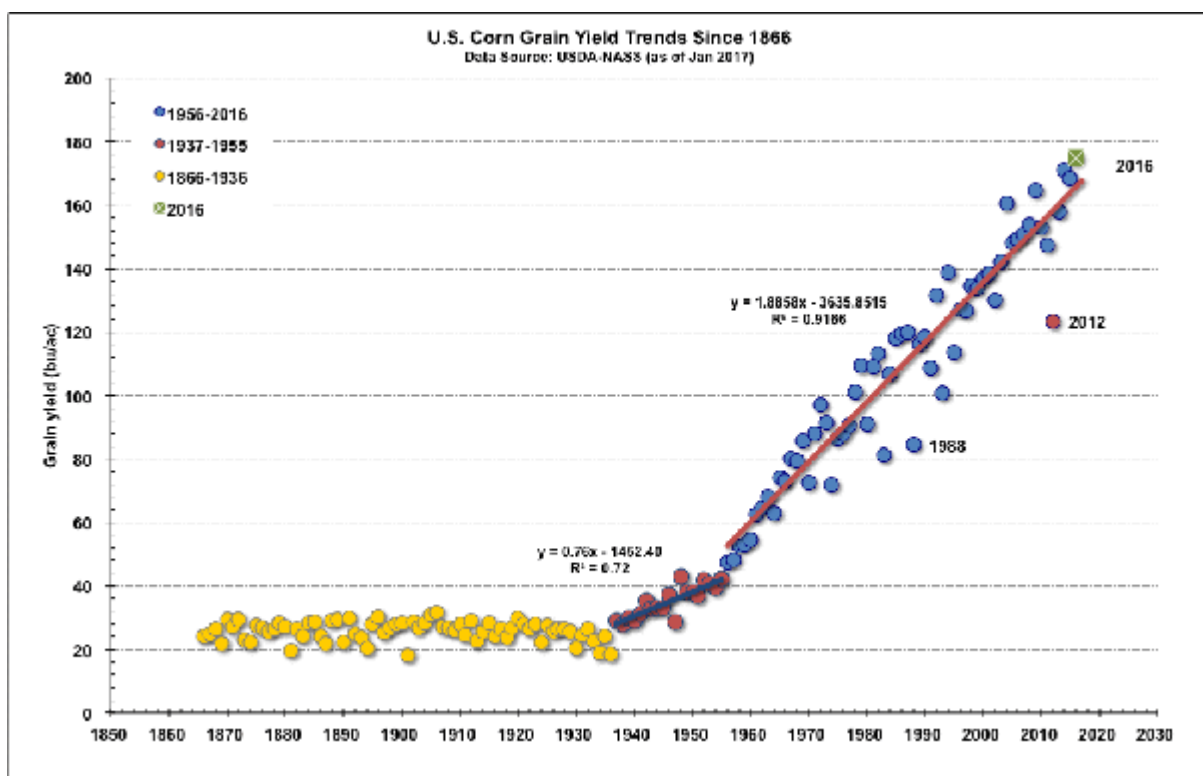


It might seem too soon to consider the future of farming after Covid-19. If anything has occurred it has made it clear to all how important agriculture is in feeding the world, safely. Aside from confirming human's hierarchy of needs starts with hunger, however, hospitals all over the World face the risk of being overwhelmed treating those suffering the worst effects of the virus, and as the death-toll climbs, it may seem difficult to be optimistic about the future.

Since we don't need another article describing events or potential worst-case scenarios of Corona virus, instead I want to think through the implications of the world we will face post-virus and how we can reset our assumptions. When farming emerges from the current situation we will never go back to business as usual. There are implications of what we are learning/ have learned so far and how we prepare for a brave new world.

Dale Carnegie is credited with saying 'when the world gives you lemons make lemonade'. Oblique Strategies, a deck of cards created by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt aims to promote creativity through engineering challenges and seemingly unfortunate crises. Some of the most influential rock albums of all time credit the technique, including Eno's work with

Roxy Music, U2, Talking Heads and David Bowie. Eno's and Bowie in particular perfected the process to achieve creativity through surmounting the obstacle. Science has also benefited from scientific discoveries which have occurred during pandemics, most famously Newton's theories of gravity. Farming is the quintessential example of adaptation and pivoting. Despite wars, financial crisis, technological limitations, weather and previous pandemics, farmers have always managed to maintain an upward trajectory in productivity and efficiency.



In essence farmers routinely respond to crisis by building new mental muscles that they didn't know they had, and once exercised these skills and abilities can be maintained for the rest of our lives.

Here are some 7 examples I've been thinking of how to make farming better, for now and later.

1) It's time for farming to Embrace On-Line (no, really this time!)

Even as the world has moved on-line farming has been stymied by our reluctance to change. Laziness or the attitude of 'we've always done it this way and can never change', are all part of real barriers to the acceptance of doing business on-line.

Biosecurity changes all that. Is it a good idea to have strange people and strange cars and trucks turn up on your farm? I routinely hear of producers complaining about the numbers of salespeople turning up at the farm gate or driving on to their farms on-spec without a meeting. Equally farm managers and owners explain why they lose whole days chasing replacement parts for equipment or finding a new customer for something they want to sell, finally finding a better customer for their farms produce.

What would you do if you could never meet your suppliers or your customers in person again? The explosion of Zoom as a video meeting app, alongside the myriad of other options including Skype, Bluejeans, Microsoft meetings etc shows what is possible. Certainly, I for one am glad we weren't trying to do all this 20 years ago. The profusion of trading platforms, with Agtech start-ups tackling everything that Amazon hasn't thought of yet, shows the technology is there. [AgriWebb](#) from Australia helps you manage information flows in livestock farming, [Ag.supply](#) from Germany has over 10 million items on-line including tractor parts. Farmer Business Network in the US is an exchange of pricing and performance information for crops and a hundred websites deliver information on market pricing for food and commodities. When will we embrace them?

Equally why do we still need to meet doctors, lawyers or accountants face to face when so much of what they tell us is downloadable online? Isn't it time to make on-line your default standard, and not slide back into old practices?

When I ask Chinese colleagues what they have learned from the last 4 months of Corona virus induced confinement, it ranges from 'I know now I can work from home' to 'we will never work in the office exclusively again'. This change has occurred at the perfect time, in the sense that video conferencing, Voice Over IP, document sharing and internet speeds have

never been better, and as such even with its limitations has allowed us to be confined to our home offices and farms in a way that couldn't have been imagined just 10 years ago. The work world and agriculture has been shaken to its foundations and will never be the same again.

Isn't it time to ask why do we have so many people in offices, everyday? And if they are there, how do we make sure we maximise the value of that time together?

2) Train and retrain yourself and your team

In a world with COVID those who know how to school their kids, or who have learned to learn at home, have a distinct advantage. Equally the last weeks have demonstrated how the part of our workforce that aren't computer literate will have greater and greater challenges as the world evolves. Full computer literacy has become a basic minimum in this new world. Do all your employees have it? As we have seen with the closing of Universities and schools we have been catapulted into a world where traditional education is under threat, and continuous learning (especially on-line) will become the distinguishing feature of those who win in the future of employment and salary stakes.

The current lockdown is the ideal chance for all to embrace online courses, learning languages/ skills, acquiring certifications. Universities and Third level institutes are the obvious candidates but others such as [Khan Academy](#), [edX](#), [Coursera](#), [Linkedin](#), and [Youtube](#) offer free knowledge and skills training and this is an unbeatable opportunity.

The dictum for your farm employees and for yourself should be – don't return to the farm post-Corona virus with the same skill set!

3) Time to bury the hatchet, repair fences

So much of what we do and accomplish in farming is based on cooperation rather than competition. That said when I asked a supplier in the California Dairy industry what he felt was the most valued thing to a Dairyman he

said 'to make more money or lose less than their neighbour' (!). Often this competition even within family members leads to poor decisions, which hurt everyone, with emotional and financial costs.

As the Corona-virus confinement has evolved one of the striking features is how many people have reached out to long forgotten friends, estranged family members or simply people who they haven't stayed in contact with as life became too busy. Perhaps the Covid crisis presents the opportunity to look again within your life, consider whom you've grown distant and how to 'repair the fences'. You can never have too many friends in farming. In particular, consider how your argument or discord might have led to a worse situation for both and 'burying the hatchet' might actually lead to new alliances, shared costs or open new markets. Try it.

4) Human talent & Customer loyalty

Loyalty is a word that seems to have been valued less than ever. Labor on farms, and retention of workers, has never been so difficult as salaries increase and the lure of physically easier work in towns and cities provide a big pull. Equally customers for our food seem more and more 'transactional'; choosing their suppliers based on price and payment.

One consequence of COVID is that this might change. For example, employees will be unlikely to switch companies, and in the next 12 months I expect them to exhibit exceptional loyalty to those who continued to provide jobs when those in better paid positions in towns and elsewhere were let go. Is now the time to use the window of opportunity to your advantage, creating solid teams and a clear direction for your farm business?

Customers are showing unprecedented loyalty to farm and food suppliers who have maintained food production throughout the crisis. Keeping shelves full of eggs, milk and meats through the crisis has been appreciated almost as much as supplying them with toilet paper! Of course, the loyalty halo can go away again, when full competitiveness returns, but the direct

connection with the farm, with the food company who supply, will be a relationship that could endure.

One side story has been how consumers have returned to embrace safe and reliable choices. Packaged, processed, long life and freeze-able seems to be the mantra. A friend who reported that the shelves of her local supermarket in Boston had been cleared of Spam while the Sushi remained was an instructive anecdote. Farmers have a great opportunity to remove the middleman between them and their customers, building that relationship digitally.

Do you believe that this is the last global crisis (viral or otherwise) the global connected world we live in is likely to face? The words of Rahm Emanuel (who in turn quoted Churchill) to 'never waste a good crisis' are instructive. Just as consumers are embracing the apparent boring choices of safe food, safe investments, safe employment, won't safety and loyalty be valued differently in the immediate aftermath of COVID. Is this the time to produce consumer products on farm, available from the farm gate? In either case building solid customer loyalty should be a positive outcome of this crisis.

5) Can we do it cheaper, better?

One of the lessons from past crises, as recounted by those who have lived through them, is to act early and decisively to cut costs, grasp nettles, find ways towards new efficiencies. Do it decisively and immediately and do it once.

On farm, this means that it may be time to look at your team, look at your management. Do you have the right team or is this the time to restructure? With so much technology allowing for things to be done differently, crises such as Covid-19 can create the impetus to address issues that in more comfortable times will never be addressed.

One example of cheaper, better has been to see the way Zoom, Skype and other technologies have supplanted the need for face to face meetings. Why do meetings on the farm or at conferences take so long? The same

meeting online usually ends up taking half the time. Can't meetings be faster, with a bias for action, with clearer, better outcomes? Is travel necessary? Flying, driving etc? Can it be replaced?

Face to face meetings will continue to have a disproportionate importance in farm business. Producers value physical interactions and decision making in a way that is challenged in a technological world. Much of this relates to the non-verbal parts of human communication; body language, tone of voice, and all of these are lost in the virtual world of emails and slack.

Equally farmer meetings, committee meetings and local cooperatives require the need for unanimity. This however fosters larger and larger meetings, with the meetings before the meeting which end up being unwieldy and inflexible. Can it be done differently, online?

Technology will require human communication to adapt, understanding the subtleties and nuances of a non-contact and less visible world and fix the misunderstandings of text or email language.

Can we remove the costs on our farm or in our business that seem automatic? Technology offers answers and Agriculture world needs to embrace a future where normal can become not.

6) Work life balance

The concept of work life balance is hardly a new one, however it's obvious that the average manager works longer hours than ever before, begging the question whether increased connectivity is a result of new technologies has made us better at our jobs, or just give us the opportunity to be reminded and answer questions about them more often. Stories of bosses and customers demanding 24 hour a day availability, are the stuff of legends. EU companies are restricted by law to limited hours worked per week (e.g. 35 hours in France, 38 in Germany) and offer generous vacation and other time off. US and UK companies tend to be the outliers in working long hours with 40% of US employees regularly working more than 50 hours, and 20% exceeding 60 hours. Some countries have

expressly banned the use of work devices at home, in an attempt to hold back the tide, but in a global marketplace being unwilling to stay connected puts you at a competitive disadvantage, especially to developing countries such as India and China. One Harvard study showed executives clocking an average of 72 hours a week.

The trickle-down effects at farm level are evident. Traditionally farms by their nature allowed owners to be both working and home at the same time. As small and medium sized farms are consolidating, the farmer-manager-owner role being replaced with more structured management roles within large farm enterprises. And these managers are changing their behaviour to reflect the 24 hour a day connectedness they see in the contacts they have in farm suppliers of equipment, feed, crop inputs and livestock.

Working from home during Covid has caused many to reassess the work-life balance, and we may yet see a sea change in people's attitude to work. When faced with a pandemic that for many introduces the first glimpse of our mortality and few of us will emerge from this without knowing someone who has died as a result of corona virus. Will this change our attitude to work, and the pursuit of material happiness? Perhaps, but it's certainly something to consider as confinement caused by the virus recedes.

7) Change is Good

To misquote Gordon Gecko in the movie Wall Street 'change is good'. What change could you see in your business that would make it more effective, more resilient? This period is an opportunity to take the time to review all aspects of your operation and consider how every aspect may be improved with technology and new practices.

What options does technology offer? Can you manage your farm remotely, using cameras and sensors? Could you use artificial intelligence within your business to make better decisions? Can you consider 3-D printing to replace farm equipment parts, or even to print a lunchtime pizza for your

farm workers? Could you utilize VR or AR to teach and train new team members better or allow them to virtually visit places and see best practices from farms around the world without leaving home. Can robots be employed to replace menial jobs such as picking, harvesting, milking or even vaccinations? What is the role of camera's, such as [Cainthus](#) Alus, and machine learning within the production process to reduce errors and eliminate mistakes?

Or as one feed nutrition company executive I know said:

‘Every two years we have another group of consultants join us and review our business and business models. McKinsey, Bain, BCG, KPMG or Deloitte Monitor for example. They always recommend a radical restructuring, changing from whatever we are currently doing, moving from feed product based to regional based structures, or from regional to species focus. Whatever we are doing they tear it up and makes us start again’. I asked him, believing him to be a fairly conservative veterinarian and normally reluctant to change to tell me if there was any benefit. ‘Honestly Aidan each time we do it we see a surge in energy, and efficiencies. No one likes it but change is good’

Or as the phrase goes ‘If you don’t like change you are going to like irrelevance even less’.

For further information, attend the **Live Webinar**:



When: Friday April 10th, 11am Pacific, 7pm GMT

Duration: 30 min

Register here: <https://event.on24.com/wcc/r/2252352/E59D7E04E7079813D2A97820A705B854>
