

Jean-Michel Boyer



Time to embrace digital farming

Farmers can now collect and access a massive amount of information about farming operations, soils and crops. Could employing this data help steer a way through an uncertain future?

W UK agriculture is facing big challenges in 2017: Brexit places critical funding packages under threat, the lack of single market membership may make trade more difficult, and access to labour will be more difficult when borders close.

During the past few years, long-term total factor productivity has been moving upwards - albeit slowly - improving 0.7 per cent between 2014 and 2015. But, overall income from farming has been less buoyant. In 2015, a combination of factors including lower commodity prices and poor exchange rates led to a 24 per cent decline.

So how can the agricultural industry cope with this tough business environment?

D igital farming holds great potential to boost productivity and income. Advances in technology have revolutionised every other industry and farming is no exception. Machinery is becoming more efficient, big data enables identification of relevant patterns and trends, and tasks that were once time-consuming are now partly or fully automated.

Next generation Global Navigation Satellite Systems (GNSS), driverless vehicle technology and Internet of Things (IoT) technology offer the potential for colossal productivity growth.

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Agricultural vehicles can be automated and equipped with sensors that harvest not only crops, but also data. On top of performing their basic functions, they can also gather information about plant health, soil composition, yields and even field topography.

Drone and satellite technology can complement this and can also double as flight planning tools. When equipped with certain software, they can evaluate crop conditions and boost yields by targeting inputs where most needed.

The industry is often reluctant to embrace technology - given the level of investment it requires their reasons are understandable. That said, the consequences of failing to adapt are too severe to ignore. Lost productivity and efficiency all too often equate to lost revenue.

Investing in new technology should be an operational priority. Farmers must ensure they maximise their Annual Investment Allowance, allowing them to write off expenditure against taxable profits.

C ashflow-sensitive businesses should also investigate the various finance options at their disposal. A company that can spread the costs across several years is a business that has far more flexibility.

It's also not committed to tools or machines that quickly become obsolete. At the end of their agreement, they can simply upgrade to a new and improved product on comparable terms.

Moreover, it isn't limited to one vehicle, tool or machine - farmers can use finance to invest in a comprehensive digital agriculture package. This provides a significant competitive advantage, without causing a black hole in finances.

A farmer who can automate trivial tasks, work from more accurate data and boost profits through efficiency, will be ahead of the competition.

The average farmer thinks in seasons, but the technologically savvy farmer thinks in years and decades. If they seize the advantages before them, they'll be rewarded with a rich harvest.

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Below: Sophisticated terminals don't just provide the upmost control, they can also gather huge amounts of useful data at the same time



Tractor-mounted sensors can monitor crop nutrition requirements in real time and adjust dose rates to match their precise needs

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