

MWAF interview: Jen Christie

Work title/s: Director of Business Development 4-H

Education: Bachelor of Commerce Ag Business, University of Guelph
EMBA, Ivey Business School

1. What are the main milestones of your career? What were the reasons for them?

When I led the advertising and promotions team at John Deere Canada, I had the opportunity to work on several different projects which allowed me to develop my leadership skills, gain experience, knowledge about agriculture across Canada and develop my brand.

Participating in the Youth Ag Summit in 2013, then completing my EMBA in 2014 and travelling to India, China and Morocco were also very eye-opening and life changing experiences for me.

An important recognition was when I was selected among the Top 100 Most Powerful Women in Canada in the “Young Leaders” (under 30) category in 2013 by the Women’s Executive Network. This award opened many doors for me afterwards.

Finally, chairing the Global 4-H Network Summit in 2017 was one of the most rewarding milestones I’ve accomplished. It brought together 500 participants from 30 countries and was the largest volunteer team I ever led. Participants have told me it changed their life and was the best 4-H experience.

2. What motivates you in good times and through road blocks?

I try to focus on making progress, one step at a time and celebrate progress with gratitude. In regards of roadblocks, often they are there when there is something we can learn, so I try to understand the pushback and adjust approach needed to keep moving ahead. I rely a lot on others for support when I find myself up against a roadblock. I also reflect a lot (maybe too much) to try to learn from these experiences.

3. Did you see yourself as a taking a leadership role in this field before?

Not the way I have. Early in my career I focused on establishing myself in John Deere while at the same time, building a brand for myself. The Ag Women’s Network evolved out of my own professional development path. Most of the company’s leaders were men then and I was seeking to connect with women in leadership to understand how they managed personal and professional success in this environment. My intention at the beginning was to develop as a leader but not necessarily as a leader for women. I didn’t expect AWN to be as big as it is today.

4. Why are you involved with gender issues in ag?

As said before, I felt compelled to find women in positions of leadership because I didn’t see them at John Deere or its dealerships. Once we started the AWN, I heard stories from women

who had experienced blatant sexism, discrimination and harassment and I realized the industry was still not as inclusive as I had thought. The worst consequence is that people get hurt. Overall, the industry misses out on the innovation that is possible when there is more diversity of perspectives, including more women in leadership. I want everyone who wants to be a part of the exciting growth happening in Canadian agriculture to feel they are welcome here.

5. Please comment on what's been going on with women in ag up to now? What's going on now? What do you see happening in the future?

It is encouraging that there are conversations going on and there is support from the federal government. There is much to be done though. Conversations among women are helpful to understand what issues are affecting people but often the leaders who can help make change are not in the room, so we aren't yet seeing changes where they are needed, e.g., workplace harassment. We have learned that in general, the experience of women farmers is different than that of working in the industry, so we feel we need to open up the conversation to include more industry. That way we can begin to acknowledge and address the issues which might be preventing ag from attracting great talent from outside the "ag circle".

6. What are you doing now? Why?

I am trying to better understand my leadership style so I can use my strengths to help sustain the AWN. This is all volunteer, and I also work for a non-profit so I am constantly trying to do more with few resources. It's like being in a start-up all the time. It's exciting but requires constant innovation and can be draining if I try to do too much. I am looking forward to empowering our team to grow the AWN as they want and focusing more on creating a fun and rewarding experience for the volunteers.

7. What would you like to leave behind you after retirement?

I don't think about retirement now but at that time, I hope the AWN won't exist because it won't be needed. We are thankful for what other women did before us but hope that the next generation doesn't have to face the same challenges we are.

8. What do you think are the most important characteristic good leaders should have?

Definitely and first, empathy. It is critical to understand and relate to others and build relations. Second, humility, being able to put your team first and not worry about getting credit for yourself. Third, communication to lay out expectations and communicate effectively during conflicts and critical conversations.

9. What do you think is necessary to engage industry in gender conversations and make progress for the women's file in Canada?

There are many great examples of organizations that have a great culture where everyone thrives so this is not impossible. Frankly speaking, I don't think we will see much progress until industry leadership decides this is an opportunity.

You don't know what you don't know and I didn't think that gender discrimination existed in agriculture because I hadn't experienced it or recognized it when I did. When I started hearing stories from other women, I was shocked. I think many of our industry leaders would also be surprised to hear what some women have dealt with working in agriculture.

I hope everyone would agree we should not tolerate harassment or discrimination, but preventing it from happening is where the hard work starts. It is uncomfortable to confront because no one wants to hear they haven't done the best they could do and the impact of these experiences is extremely personal. There isn't one easy solution but it starts with making it a priority, and I commend the leaders and organizations that have done this. I think we will see more because the reality is every industry from mining to tech to food service is looking at this. Can the agriculture industry afford not too?