

Cutting a career swath

Five agribusiness people talk about how – and why – they got to where they are today, and what’s required to be successful.

By Jason Karszes and Eleanor Jacobs

Dan Abrahamson is district manager for Telmark LLC, working from his home in Whitney Point, N.Y. He provides leasing services to agricultural and rural commercial businesses in eight central and south central New York counties. Abrahamson graduated from SUNY Cobleskill. He then transferred to Cornell University, graduating in 1989 with a bachelor’s degree in agricultural business. He worked on a dairy farm while growing up and attending school.



Dan Abrahamson



Dan Button

Dan Button is a dairy nutrition and management consultant employed by 21 dairy farmer members of the Cayuga Marketing Group, Cayuga County, N.Y. He works with his clients on nutrition and management areas such as milk quality and employees.

After attending SUNY Morrisville for two year, Button transferred to Cornell where he earned a bachelor’s degree. Button pursued a medical degree, attending Dartmouth for two years.

Kevin Ellis is a loan officer and business consultant with Western New York Farm Credit, based in Phelps, N.Y. He works with borrowers, develops new lease and loan business, and provides consulting services to clients in areas such as budgeting and business planning. He received a bachelor’s from Cornell in 1996, majoring in dairy management. Ellis grew up on a 250-cow dairy in central New York and worked there while in school.



Kevin Ellis



Tom Shephard

Tom Shephard is the president of AgriEdge Development and vice president of Agri-Financial Services and counsel for Dairylea Cooperative in Syracuse, N.Y. His responsibilities run the gamut from working on agricultural business development projects to making cattle leasing arrangements. Shephard received a bachelor’s degree at Cornell in agricultural economics and animal science, a master’s degree from Michigan State University and his law degree at Albany Law School.

FYI

■ Jason Karszes is a dairy business management specialist with PRO-DAIRY.

■ For ideas on careers in agriculture, see <http://ageducate.org/careers>



Jessica Skinner

Jessica Skinner has worked as an agricultural engineer for Rochester, N.Y.-based Agricultural Consulting Services for three years. Skinner, who is based in Unadilla, N.Y., designs structures and practices for dairy producers that help them meet environmental

goals. Her territory includes all of New York and parts of Pennsylvania. Skinner grew up on a dairy in Schuylar County, N.Y., and received a bachelor's degree in agricultural and biological engineering at Cornell.

The Manager: What career did you intend to pursue?

Abrahamson: While I enjoyed working on the farm, I realized that it wasn't what I wanted to do for a career. But working there did cement my interest in agriculture. Right out of school, I worked for two years in landscaping. I wasn't sure there was enough opportunity in the landscaping business, or that it was going to be my career, when a position opened up with Telmark.

Button: I was pre-veterinary at Cornell but didn't get into the program on the first try, so I needed to find something to do. Steve Morrill, a friend, steered me in this direction. I went to work for Cargill and stayed there for 12 years. In the mid-1990s I considered a career change to medicine and took some medical classes. I looked at private consulting, seeing it as a potential trend. I felt there were a lot of areas with the dairies in the Cayuga Marketing Group where I could contribute.

Ellis: Coming through school, my intention was to dairy farm, using intensive rotational grazing. Instead of going right home to the farm, I followed Don Rogers' advice. The retired Farm Credit consultant tells young people to work elsewhere to gain experience. I worked for Farmland Industries in Nebraska as a dairy nutritionist for two years. I wanted to learn more about the business side of agriculture. Moving back to New York, I started as a loan officer with Western New York Farm Credit and have recently moved into consulting. I'm looking forward to doing more consulting but haven't ruled

out going back to the farm.

Shephard: When I was in graduate school, I decided to be a lawyer because I liked agricultural policy, environmental issues and intellectual property rights. Applying these in a business environment was a goal.

Skinner: Starting my college career, I intended to pursue a graduate degree in biotechnology. Agricultural and biological engineering was an option as an undergraduate major. After spending a summer working with my local agricultural community, I realized that my real interest lie in helping farms comply with environmental regulations.

The Manager: How did you prepare for your career?

Abrahamson: My education focus was on ag business, so I was taking as many courses related to this field that I could.

Button: Working at Cargill provided me with a great network of experts from across the country.

Ellis: Since this wasn't the career I had in mind, I didn't spend a lot of time pursuing education on business and finance. I did take a few courses in those areas at Cornell. All my experiences in the production side have proven valuable. I've taken advantage of employer and private training opportunities. I'm starting work on my master's in business administration to increase my understanding of business organizations and financial markets.

Shephard: I was already doing a lot of Dairylea's work at a Syracuse law firm. I decided that I wanted to do projects and transactions that were more my own, and Dairylea offered that opportunity.

Skinner: The summer after my freshman year in college, I interned with a county Soil and Water Conservation District and did some crop scouting. After my sophomore year, I worked as a lab technician in California. After college I worked for the Wyoming County Soil and Water Conservation District and then the Skaneateles Lake Watershed. Working with government gave me valuable insights that help now that I'm working in the private sector.

The Manager: Did you have a mentor?

Abrahamson: Within the business, I don't have a mentor. Starting out in Telmark, I worked with a training officer to learn the ins and outs of the company and to

get my feet wet working with customers. Telmark is very entrepreneurial, and we work with peer groups to develop our skills in offering leasing services to our customers. Working with peers who have different experiences and ideas has been important.

Button: I've had several mentors. But the biggest influence was the team building at Cargill – one person was particularly good at team building and communication.

Ellis: Since starting work, I have always had a mentor. Their knowledge, experience and ability to teach kept me from reinventing the wheel. Some of my mentors have been assigned through the company, but I try to find people who are doing what I want to do and try to build a relationship with them. Mentors usually don't come to you; you have to seek them out.

Shephard: I've had several mentors. There were professors and colleagues whose input I valued. They were all people who pushed the envelope; I wanted to be aligned with them.

Skinner: My mentor was Tom Brace at Soil and Water. He pointed me in the direction of conservation work when I was unsure about what my career would be. He encouraged me and helped me find a job.

The Manager: What skills are necessary for success in a career?

Abrahamson: It's the ability to communicate with anyone. In sales if you can't communicate, you're dead in the water. Being book-smart is good, but street-smart is what makes a person.

Button: It's important to stay current on knowledge and skills needed for a career. If you're learning a lot and excited, you do your best work. People and communication skills are critical. You must have knowledge, but you need people skills to be able to sell that knowledge.

Ellis: I feel a good work ethic is imperative to success in any career. Other skills of equal importance are flexibility, communication and development of a network of contacts.

Shephard: I was told by someone when I was contemplating my first job, 'Work hard and make a name for yourself.' A work ethic is important, as are contacts. Never burn bridges, especially in agriculture. Finally, be forward-looking – be able to blow up the current model and try something else.

Skinner: The most important skill is to be able to interact with people from all walks of

life. I deal with farmers and regulators. To learn that skill, it's great to have someone who's good at it as a model. And all my bosses have been good at interacting with people.

The Manager: If you had it to do over again, would you?

Abrahamson: I would skip the landscaping portion. I went into landscaping because I didn't think I was ready for a desk job and that I was not a sales person. After two years I realized that if I wanted to be in ag business, I needed to change.

Button: I was very technical-oriented when I started. It was as though 'I know everything. Why aren't they listening?' It took me time to realize I needed to learn people skills.

Ellis: I would have taken more business courses and taken advantage of summer internships. I have been very happy so far. I still have personal and business goals.

Shephard: I would take advantage of internships and employment as an undergraduate, which I didn't do.

Skinner: I might not have gone to California (to work as a lab technician).

The Manager: Are there career opportunities in your field?

Abrahamson: Leasing is an important finance tool in several industries. So there's plenty of opportunity for young people in the leasing field.

Ellis: There are many opportunities in lending and consulting, especially for people with ag backgrounds. To become a consultant, a person must build skills and real-world experience, often in entry level jobs in subject areas related to the the focus of the consulting.

Shephard: The world of consulting, finance and other support services to agriculture is changing, and businesses that are responsive to businesses' needs in these areas will grow. To support this growth, they need qualified and committed people who can interact with people in and outside of agriculture.

Skinner: The opportunities are endless because of CAFO. Both the public and private sectors are flourishing. CAFO. There is a great need for agricultural engineers but not necessarily the typical ones but environmental engineers. ■