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The Human Capital Issue: Ensuring the Future of Food and Agribusiness

*Global Networks, Global Perspectives and Global Talent
Discussions on the Development of Human Capital in Agribusiness¹*

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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As the world's oldest profession (despite rumors to the contrary!), agriculture has historically been a family-based and deeply local way of life, and the people in agribusiness industries are assumed to be traditional and resistant to evolution. Moreover, agribusinesses are generally defined in a manner that emphasizes their place in the food production chain: dairy farmer, feed manufacturer, integrated food company, etc. Yet contemporary agribusiness is sophisticated and dynamic, with change being driven by rapid advances in technology, communications and globalization.

As with most industries, the agribusiness supply chain is increasingly complex, increasingly connected and increasingly global. Changes in technology, demographics, economics and climate can lead to abrupt and dramatic changes in supply and demand. Consumers around the world are more informed – and more demanding. At the same time, the industry faces the extreme challenge of feeding a growing population while respecting the environment, while keeping food prices low.

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At IFAMA, it is becoming increasingly clear that the “glue” (i.e., the invisible element that holds it all together) that will define the success of agribusiness organizations in this new environment is not physical resources or financial clout but rather human capital.

This human capital, or the people who work in all the different aspects of the food production chain, must be educated in both hard and soft skills. We must be adaptable and truly global in our perspective. We must be capable of communication with our traditional audiences as well as the broader range of stakeholders who increasingly shape our business. We need to reach out to these stakeholders, including consumers and influencers such as regulators and the press, through both traditional means and new media. And to succeed, this commitment to develop human capital must lead to continuous improvements at all levels of the organization, from senior leaders, to managers to the newest line employee.

IFAMA’s objective is to support the international agribusiness complex as it navigates the human capital journey.

These essays, both submitted and invited, address the structural challenges of modern agribusiness and offer strategies for surviving the shifting sands of today’s agricultural landscape. Agribusiness contends with issues that certainly face other industries, such as ill-informed, sometimes hostile media; succession challenges in family owned businesses; and the complexity of merging cultures to build a truly global business, but there are other issues that are particular to our industry. The articles chosen for this issue reach across the narrow sectoral divisions that characterize much of agribusiness writing, applying a broader business perspective to the issues we face. As agribusiness transforms from local and individual operations into global networks we need to develop the global perspectives and the global talent pool that will enable us to survive these challenges and make the most of these opportunities.

The objectives of this special issue, “*Global Networks, Global Perspectives and Global Talent*,” are to raise awareness of the importance of human capital to a wide audience, share innovative ideas, and identify areas for further study. The Special Issue is organized into five sections. The first, *Human Capital in Agribusiness: Challenges and Opportunities*, provides the perspectives of five industry leaders on why Human Capital is a critical issue for business, academic, and government leaders. Section two, *Attracting, Developing and Maintaining Talent*, includes essays on education, and corporate learning. The third section, *Human Capital in a Global Industry*, covers a range of world-spanning topics such as leveraging diversity and managing multi-stakeholder and cross-cultural interactions. Section four, *Responding to the Needs of a Complex and Dynamic World*, highlights the need for new skills and capabilities. The final section, *Innovation in Practice*, provides several real-world examples of organizations that are taking a different path.