

Getting big gear through a tight spot

Like many business owners, when talk of lockdowns and border closures started early in 2020, Ag Technology Group's Managing Director, Andre Syben wondered how their business would get through.

"We'd been through past financial crises and thankfully came out the other side" notes Syben, "this time in the middle of April I found myself wondering how our business would survive". Accustomed to travelling offshore for major international R&D projects for the likes of German-based agricultural manufacturers Claas and Lemken, the Ag Technology team found themselves facing closed borders and business uncertainty. Little did they know that in under 90 days they'd form a new company, delivering an industry-leading training program for people from all walks of life.



Now, for tomorrow

Syben got together with trusted advisor Richard Williams at Baker Tilly Staples Rodway Waikato. "As we often do, we got in front of a whiteboard, I ran our ideas past Richard and we thrashed out a way forward" notes Syben. "Some accountants have a reputation as boring number crunchers, but the Baker Tilly Staples Rodway Waikato team is much more than that" says Syben. "Yes, they do the numbers but that is just a tiny part of what they offer".

Now, for tomorrow

'AG Drive', a new subsidiary of the AG Technology Group, owned by Andre and Paula Syben, was formed to help solve a looming issue for the agri-sector; a lack of trained drivers capable of handling big gear in tricky environments. "We knew that this coming season thousands of overseas seasonal workers, many of them experienced drivers, wouldn't be coming to New Zealand. At the same time we were hearing about thousands of jobs likely to be lost by Kiwis and a need for retraining, we felt we had to do something" notes Andre.

"Our team worked relentlessly, crazy hours to be honest, with a network of local and national contacts, many of whom Baker Tilly Staples Rodway introduced us to, to unlock our idea's potential" says Syben. Within 90 days the initial program was confirmed and the first recruits were getting behind the wheel with additional support from the Ministry of Social Development.

Less chalk & more walk

Ag Technology recognised they had equipment, machinery, farms and a great team which had been focused for a number of decades on getting the best out of heavy machinery in the agri-sector. With an abundance of on-farm and business experience to draw on, they formed what is fast becoming an industry leader in agri-sector driver training.

Less chalk and more walk is their mission (or more time in the seat so to speak), which in this case is in the seat of large 200 horsepower tractors worth \$200,000, weighing upwards of 25 tonnes when all the implements are attached. Driving one of these beasts in a field with troughs, fences, hills and mud to negotiate alongside other vehicles is not for the faint hearted.

On-vehicle training is key to the programme's success.



Up & running early

“Training is done on site, in real time, using the same equipment they’ll be using on the job” notes Ag Drive’s Manager Gareth Wild. There’s a big focus on safety and best practice so contractors know they can trust Ag Drive’s grads with their own specialised equipment on their clients’ farms. “Gear like this in the hands of untrained operators could do a lot of costly damage or worse, so we take health and safety very seriously” notes Wild, himself a former driver trainer and health and safety officer in the agri-sector before he took up the reins at Ag Drive.



Like many modern teaching environments, simulators and classroom activities have a role to play at Ag Drive. The team says the big difference is that their classroom is based on the farm at their Tamahere premises.

Participants are out of the classroom and in the cab on Day One and have usually got behind the wheel by Day Two.

“There’s a bit of whiplash and bunny-hopping for some at first, especially those that are driving a manual for the first time” notes Wild. “They are definitely outside their comfort zone but with our tutors beside them in the cab they pick it up really fast”. There’s a strong emphasis on practical real time learning alongside Ag Drive’s experienced tutor coaches.

More than just learning to drive

Beyond driver training, Ag Drive’s team have been delighted by how much impact the program has also had on personal confidence. “The uncertainty of losing a job and finding another this year has been tough on people, we see that when they arrive” notes Paula Syben who takes a special interest in the pastoral care and placement of participants at the conclusion of the program. She’s well versed for this work with a background in psychology and well-being.

“What I’m really proud of is that we build confidence. When they start they look daunted, unsure if they can do it, stepping behind the wheel of a big tractor is intimidating. They leave confident they can take control and that confidence flows over to many aspects of their life”.



The program has trained people aged 17 to 65 years, from all walks of life; airline pilots, beneficiaries, a former school teacher and office workers. The team says what’s most important is they come with a learner’s attitude.

Best fit for the cab

You can sense this team is focused on making sure the program delivers on its promise to the agri-contractors in the sector to 'deliver someone who fits your business'. Ag Drive uses the close relationships built with Ag Technology clients over years to match individuals on each program, taking a 'best fit approach'.



"Because we know the culture and style of each of the contractors and large farmers we work alongside, we also know where best to place people from each program" notes Business Development Manager, Vinette Wilken. She points out that the low ratio of students to instructor (3 students per instructor) means Ag Drive tutors get a real-life feel for how each participant responds to instructions, what drives each of them and what they are interested in. It seems a true win-win, giving both the agri-contractors and new drivers the best chance they'll work out well for each other.

The future is bright

The Ag Drive team is working closely with Wintec with a plan to deliver Unit Standards on the national framework. They believe the sky's the limit in terms of where this program can grow, with the potential to align further with polytechnics and industry training organisations in future.

When borders reopen they'll also be well placed to provide a New Zealand-based training environment for those new to our pastures, to ensure Health and Safety and New Zealand Road Code protocols are met. The course will also offer prospective employers a good capability assessment of overseas drivers and workers and which machinery and tasks they are best suited for.

Ag Drive is certainly keen to make a big difference going forward, with Andre Syben convinced this is just the start of something much bigger. "What 2020 has shown me is that we have huge potential. I feel a moral responsibility to help people turn their lives around and be the best they can be. I want people to leave Ag Drive with a sense of achievement and renewed confidence in their own abilities".

Want to know more?

If you know someone that could benefit from such an opportunity you can reach Ag Drive via their website www.Ag Drive.co.nz or call **0508 Ag Drive (0508 243 7483)**. Programs include tractor driving and machine operating alongside NZTA road rules, basic maintenance and everything needed to be ready for the driver's seat. Health and Safety is a key priority, with AG Safe NZ a key program partner.

To find out more about Baker Tilly Staples Rodway's Waikato team go [here](#).

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