When you think about jobs in agronomy, what is the first thought that comes to mind? A crop consultant walking fields, scouting for insects and diseases, taking soil samples, and making recommendations to farmers? It could be that. But, wow have things changed. Today, agronomy offers endless opportunities.

I recently had the chance to sit down with a panel of industry professionals to discuss their exciting careers in agriculture, how they got where they are today, and what advice they have for recent graduates. They all agree the job outlook for agriculture graduates looks very promising!

I was joined by a terrific panel: David Kosztyo, Area Manager for DuPont Pioneer; Mike Dillon, Northeast U.S. Sales Manager for DuPont Pioneer; Mark Riehl, Customer Agronomist for Mycogen Seeds; Joyce Soltis, Sales Rep for Syngenta; Michael Bittel, Senior Vice President/General Manager for King Arthur Flour; and Cliff Love, General Manager of Carolina-Eastern Vail (an independent farm retailer).

All of the panelists have at least a bachelor’s degree, and most of them got started in the ag industry directly out of college, except for Mike Dillon and Michael Bittel. Mike started in the U.S. Army as a way to pay for college, learning valuable teamwork and leadership skills along the way, and Michael started in an administrative trainee program for Quad/Graphics, gaining essential business skills. Both David and Cliff were fortunate to be able to start in management trainee programs for ag retailers, allowing a group of area sales agency teams in New England to be assigned.

He worked hard for 18 years with Pioneer as a sales rep before moving in the countryside to offer products to farmers, walking fields with customers, and developing grower meetings.

One step above David is Mike Dillon, who oversees the field sales activities of employees, independent reps, and dealers in 15 states. Mike also worked as a field agronomist to area manager before moving to their Northeast headquarters. David chooses to keep his family in one location, whereas Mike’s promotion required flexibility in geography.

Mark Riehl is a customer agronomist, working as an expert in Mycogen’s seed lineup. He spends more time out in the fields, working directly with sales reps to help customers understand where their fields are, and how to seed, fertilize, and plant. He also gets to be “the detective” when crops aren’t growing right. While often being blamed on the seed, 99% of the time it is caused by something else like poor fertility, low pH, planting depth, etc.

Mark says his “office is working in the fields, elevators, and farms in the countryside” and he “personally can’t think of another job with a better office or business suit!”

Joyce Soltis has just retired after 30+ years with what started as Ciba-Geigy, and then became Novartis, and finally Syngenta. She spent her entire career as a sales rep and wouldn’t have it any other way. She enjoys the cycles of the seasons, which keep things exciting; in the winter—planning, forecasting, and presentations; in the spring—field visits, recommendations, and training on product handling; in the summer and fall—harvest and product evaluations and always visits with customers. Joyce says, “My job is more than selling products. It is all about building relationships.”