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Starting a career in agri business

Simon Walther, Market planner

“With my combination of agricultural background, scientific training and comprehensive knowledge of the CIS-countries, I have filled a market niche” says Simon Walther about himself. Since the beginning of this year, the 32-year-old is responsible for strategic marketing in the CIS-countries, the former Soviet republics and for market research at John Deere. Growing up on an arable farm near Nuremberg, Walther was not sure, which career path to take after his Abitur. Internships at an arable farm in Michigan and at a dairy farm in Ontario led him to his decision: He signed up for biology at the University of Würzburg. “Two semesters later, I recognized that this was not the right thing for me”, he says today. “I didn’t want to spend my whole life in a laboratory. I missed getting my hands dirty from farm work”. So he changed to the University of Hohenheim, at the beginning with focus on plant production for bachelor and finally to the Master Agricultural Economics. “That was a very international study program. Only five of about 20 students were Germans” says Walther. Finally, his master-thesis set the course for his future: “An agricultural machinery producer commissioned the institute to do a market study on the Russian tractor market.” Walther travelled to Russia, to interview more than 100 farmers in different regions and discovered his interest for the country.

“Actually, I already wanted to go abroad during my studies. But that didn’t happen”, admits Walther. For this reason he had the idea to write his doctoral thesis abroad, in Canada. The University of Alberta sent him an admission. As he knew Eastern Europe due to his master thesis, he wanted to write about this region. Walther thought that both, the similar climatic conditions and Russia as possible trade partner, make this region particularly interesting. “I rather got the impression, that scientists over there were particularly interested in the complex methodology and less in practical agricultural economics. The important point was that the thesis should be published in one of the scientific journals. The topic Russia was of no importance”, Walther regrets. “I think that unfortunately, the development towards less practical agricultural economy is to be observed at German universities, too.” Walther says. For this reason, it was a perfect possibility to work for the headquarters of the *agri benchmark* network in Brunswick. Walther combined his *agri benchmark* project to



Simon Walther found a niche he could perfectly fill with his education: he is researching market potentials in Eastern Europe

establish the *agri benchmark* methodology in the Ukraine with his doctoral thesis about the competitiveness of agricultural holdings in the Ukraine.

Finally, the topic of his thesis was his key to John Deere. In summer 2012, Simon Walther was invited by John Deere to present his doctoral thesis: “We talked about my research and about agriculture in Eastern Europe in general. Subsequently, they invited me for another meeting – my job interview.” The combination of his agricultural background and the scientific experience is a great benefit for him now, as among his tasks is not only pure market research, but the close contact with the clients, too. It’s his daily work now, to identify their wishes and needs, to develop solutions and products, customer and business models. Right now, Walther travelled four weeks in Russia. “You have to become attuned to the culture without thinking you actually knew everything better”, he describes the requirements of his job. Language skills are an essential for his job. English is the working language in the department he’s working in at John Deere. He even speaks Russian “for domestic use” as he says. But his language skills are good enough travel through the country on his own, to converse and to recognize when the translator, who accompanies him, mistranslates or does not translate some remarks. Simon Walther describes another significant property: “You have to be able to think ‘outside the box’ and to follow new approaches.” As he is the source of new ideas for the product developers and is integrated in the processes between product developers and marketing, he has to keep his mind open for creative solutions. “The CIS countries are a huge growth market. People with knowledge of agricultural practice, Eastern Europe’s agricultural economics and appropriate language skills are hard to find. For a long time to come there should be many good opportunities for graduates, that are not yet sure, which career path to take”, he summarizes.