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LEVEL THE FIELD

Working for a more equitable farming industry

A comprehensive guide to

female-friendly recruiting

Why women are good for farm businesses and how to hire more of them

The business case for gender equality

UK agriculture is facing its biggest period of upheaval since the Second World War.

Running a profitable business is set to become a struggle for many farmers, with the loss of direct support, low farmgate prices and high input costs all hitting the bottom line. Volatility has also become the new normal, with political change, global conflict, disease and climate change wreaking havoc on global markets.

Labour shortages in many sectors, including dairy and horticulture, are stretching farmers to their limits, and it can be hard to find time to innovate. Meanwhile, consumers are becoming more discerning and sceptical than ever before. They want farmers to do more for the environment, provide access to nature and maintain high production standards, while continuing to produce affordable food.

Put together, all of this can feel overwhelming. But the good news is, evidence shows making the farming industry more equitable for women can help with every one of these problems. Studies have shown that gender equality can bring the following advantages.

Increased profitability

Research into **male-dominated industries** has found that companies with the highest percentage of women in management are, on average, 47% more profitable than those with the lowest.

High-performing companies are also almost **50% more likely** to report that men and women have equal influence on strategy development.

Building resilience

Companies with gender-diverse boards **outperform those** with no women in terms of share price performance during times of crisis or volatility.

Recruiting and retaining talent

Companies with **higher levels of gender diversity** are linked to lower levels of employee turnover.

Thirty-five percent of an employee's **emotional investment** to their work and 20% of their desire to stay at their organisation is linked to feelings of inclusion.

Innovation

When businesses establish inclusive business cultures, they are more likely to report a **59.1% increase** in creativity, innovation and openness.

Better consumer understanding

Inclusive business cultures have been linked to a **37.9% better assessment** of consumer interest and demand.

Better environmental performance

Companies with greater gender diversity on boards have been shown to demonstrate **better environmental performance**, and those with increased gender diversity over time were also found to have higher likelihood of improvement in this area.



Female-friendly recruiting

Laying the groundwork

Ewan Anderson, associate marketing director at Eden Scott recruitment agency, gives the following advice.

Take an authentic approach to diversity and inclusion, this will help build a welcoming culture. Find out what people are looking for in a company – don't assume what people want.

Identify your purpose as a business because people want to understand what they are working for. Communicate an image of your business that appeals to a diverse audience. People will investigate websites, social media and other channels to find out about the organisation.



TOP TIPS AT A GLANCE

- **Speak to people you might be interested in hiring in future to understand what they want from work, and adapt to reflect this**
- **Consider whether your current working environment would look safe and welcoming to potential new recruits**

CASE STUDY: KAREN HALTON, CHESHIRE DAIRY FARMER

Dairy farmer Karen and her husband Tom rent 550 acres close to Congleton in Cheshire.

Their herd is currently made up of 500 calving crossbred cows (Holstein, Scandinavian Red, Montbeliarde), achieving 11,3700 litres of milk per cow per year. The couple's business is unusual, as it has bucked the national trend of labour shortages on dairy farms and is always fully staffed. Karen attributes their success to having an open mind in the recruitment process and their ability to train and guide staff. The farm business has a 50-50 split of male and female workers, but in the past, it has had a higher proportion of women.

Recruiting women

Karen says when she initially wanted to recruit women, Tom was sceptical, believing they wouldn't be able to fix things in the parlour if they broke – something that not all the male staff can do – or pick up a cow that had slipped.

She worked around this by bringing on a woman to handle calf rearing first, which was more 'acceptable', but who later progressed into milking and scraping the yard.

With Karen's persistence, and women proving they could do the jobs traditionally reserved for men, more women joined the team.



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Flexibility

They are supported with milking patterns that allow them flexibility for childcare. Milking takes place at 4.30- 8.30am, 1-4.30pm and 9-11.30pm.

For women who need to drop off or pick children up from school, they can start at 1pm and finish at 3.30pm, with someone covering their last hour in the parlour, or they can start at 3.30am and finish at 8am.

Karen believes flexibility can be built into all farm work if you are willing to find solutions and be open to change.

Positive environment

She also thinks that bringing women on to farm has 'taken the edge of the machoism' in the culture among herds people.

'When I came home to work it was all about hitting cows and shouting at them and walking around with a blue piece of alkathene pipe in your hand,' she says.

'We weren't that bad in this business, but there was a bit of it going on and it was almost embarrassing.

'If you were a bloke, you wouldn't say you love cows or you need to respect cows. But now we don't hit our cows. We don't shout.'



Writing a female-friendly advert

Putting an advert out for a job is the first official step to recruiting a new member of staff – and the first opportunity to show your business has an inclusive culture.

Before you start be open-minded about the kind of person you want for the role – try not to be bound by what you believe is the perfect person.

What to include

- The essential skills needed for the position – do not include information surplus to the main the role as many female applicants tend only apply for a job if they meet all the criteria.
- Training – make it clear training can be provided, if applicable, to help to ease any concerns about not meeting all the criteria.
- Maternity policy – even if a woman plans to utilise the policy or not, it is evidence that the business has considered their position could be filled by a woman.
- Gender-neutral language – research shows women are 50% less likely to consider a role which is advertised using ‘gender-coded language’ which will alienate women.
- Diverse team – if your business already has a diverse team, mention this in the job advert.
- Salary – transparency on salary is important to both men and women. It will avoid wasting time if the salary does not meet expectations of the candidate.
- Consider saying you would welcome applications from women, particularly for jobs which have traditionally been done by men.
- Include pictures of women alongside any advertising

WOMEN AND MACHINERY

Some roles, such as those involving machinery or arable field operations, are more likely to be carried out by men than women, according to **Farmers Weekly’s recent survey on the role of women in farming.**

Just under half of the women surveyed said they could not use the machinery in their workplace with ease (43%), compared with just 15% of men.

Women cited multiple reasons why this was the case, including a lack of training and interest in using it, as well as the challenges faced in using equipment designed for men.

Job adverts that state you will welcome applications from women too, can help overcome women’s reluctance to apply for these roles.

Women want to be treated the same and have equal opportunities.



How to use gender-neutral language

Gender-coded language can be subtle, with words such as ‘confident’ and ‘driven’ being defined as ‘masculine’ by a gender score calculator, but in the farming industry, it can also be more obvious – with adverts for a stockman, cowman’ or ‘tractor man’ still commonplace.

Replace sentences such as ‘must be strong and able to carry heavy goods’ with ‘the workload will include carrying of heavy goods, so a willingness and ability to manage this is key’.

Although a female applicant may read this and know they could do it, the wording makes it sound like the employer assumes this person will be male and hence wouldn’t consider a female applicant.

To check your advert for coded language, run it through a free tool such as the **Total Jobs decoder**.



Sharing a female friendly advert

The way people are applying for jobs has changed significantly over the past 10 years.

- There are places online that are still strongly male-oriented, such as some online forums.
- Advertise in places where women are looking for jobs, too such as local women's networks.
- Social media is a useful place to advertise, as it is used more evenly by men and women. A post on Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) or Instagram gives you access to a wider cross section of potential candidates and can be forwarded and shared beyond your own connections. It also gives you the chance to add an accompanying video or picture of the business in action to humanise the advert.
- If you have a candidate in mind for the role, and they have not applied, try asking them why.



Olivia Casey and Maddy Tyson (left) both joined the practice on Westpoint's New Graduate scheme, where new vets are given intensive, specialist professional development sessions and tailored support to ensure that their experience and skills are well-rounded in their first years in practice.

CASE STUDY: WESTPOINT FARM VETS, CHELMSFORD

When putting job adverts out, Westpoint Farm Vets in Chelmsford like to set the scene for who they are, what they do and their aspirations.

They do not place arbitrary 'years of experience' requirements into adverts, but they do outline skillsets and characteristics that they want in new team members.

They also make testimonials from current team members available and highlight that they would be happy to speak to prospective applicants to outline the realities of working with their team and clients.

The branch is mindful that people may need to take career breaks for a myriad reasons and make clear that flexibility can be accommodated.

As with the farming industry, there has been a long-held perception in the farm veterinary sector that part-time working and flexibility could not be accommodated.

But the business realised this meant highly qualified people were simply not bothering to apply for jobs, so were forced to reconsider.

According to Dr Ami Sawran, clinical director at the branch, the benefits are easy to see, with 'more fulfilled, rested and capable team members'.

The practice has gone from having predominantly male staff, to a hugely diverse team, in terms of background, sexuality and race.



Job interviews

Holding a female-friendly interview

Before a formal interview, candidates could be offered the opportunity to have a chat to ‘demystify’ the process.

This helps those who are less confident or who haven’t had an interview for a long time. Interviews should not be designed to trip the candidate up but to find out more about them.

- At the formal interview stage, you should avoid commenting on a woman’s plans to start a family or her appearance.
- It is illegal for employers to ask women about their marital status, children or plans for children during a job interview.
- If possible, invite a female coworker to the interview to get their input and perspective.
- Decide if you are prepared to offer part-time or flexible working, this will depend on the size of this business. This may not always be needed for children, but for sick parents or partners. It applies to men as much as women.

More than **half of women (52%)** surveyed by LinkedIn say a lack of flexibility at work has pushed them to leave or consider leaving a job.

‘It’s hard if you’re in a small business with two or three people,’ says Sarah Hendry, director general at the CLA. Any reasonable adjustments you are willing to make for women starting in the business should be extended to all team members, to avoid ‘othering’ or a situation where some staff are seen as having special privileges.

Thinking about suitable questions and making sure you ask all candidates broadly the same things is also an important part of interview prep.



Research shows women are more likely than men to be asked **where they see themselves in five years**, for example, which could be perceived as relating to plans to have a family.

Instead, ask candidates what they would like to achieve in their career without giving a timescale, this will give you a sense of their ambition.

It is also important to find out why a woman might want to leave her current employer at interview stage. It may be because of the culture or a lack of promotion within a business.

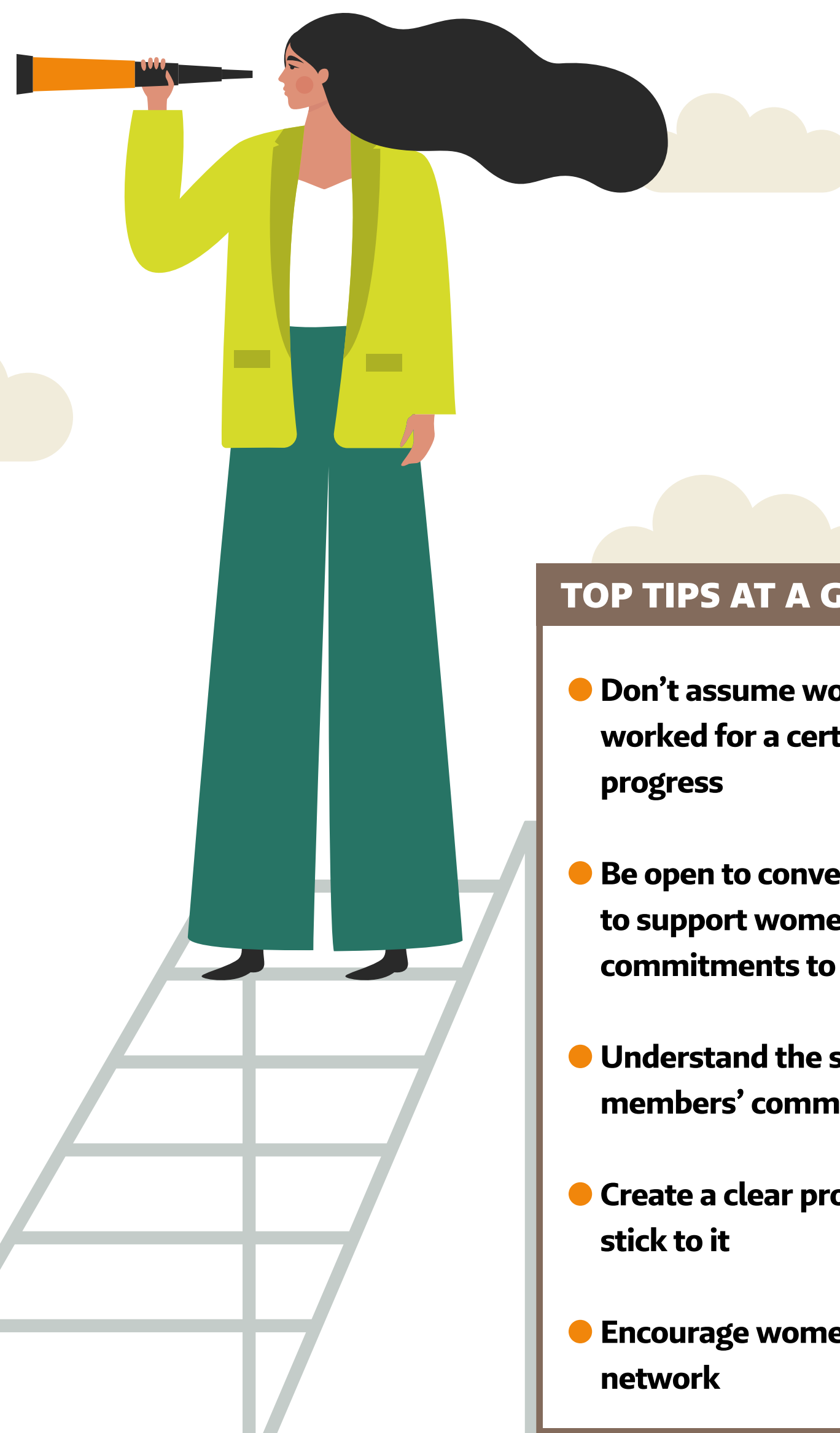
For more advice on preparing for interview as an employer, you can download **Eden Scott’s guide**.

TOP TIPS AT A GLANCE

- Offer the chance of an informal pre-interview chat to help with self-confidence problems
- During an interview, don’t comment on a woman’s appearance or her plans to start a family
- Invite a female colleague into the interview, if possible
- Think about what you can offer in terms of part-time or flexible working
- Ask suitable questions
- Understand why a woman wants to leave her current employer



Creating progression pathways



Creating clear pathways for progression is important to allow both male and female members of your team to thrive.

But women face unique challenges in that they **struggle to progress out of junior roles or into senior roles**, and are more likely to be overqualified for the role they are in.

Farm businesses can help with this by not assuming women need to have a certain amount of experience before they can progress.

Time served in a role is not necessarily a useful indication of essential qualities such as aptitude and potential.

In **Farmers Weekly's recent survey** on the role of women in agriculture, 75% of female respondents said commitments to children were preventing them from achieving their career goals.

Businesses should be open to conversations about how they can support employees, both men and women, carry out childcare duties, and allow that employee to progress.

The benefit to doing this is that it will show other women externally that there are progression opportunities available.

Understanding the scale of a candidate's ambition is also important when thinking about progression pathways, so you can adequately prepare.

Create a clear plan for progression and think about how you can help staff to reach senior management level if that's what they want. This might be:

- Training for a future position or a qualification like Basis or Facts, or perhaps an MBA.
- Sending staff to key industry events such as shows, conferences and dinners is also vital to give employees the chance to showcase their abilities and act as advocates for your business and the wider industry.
- Introducing your staff to groups such as Women in Food and Farming and Meat Business Women, which have networking opportunities as well as information exchange.
- Offering staff a set number of days a year for networking purposes.

TOP TIPS AT A GLANCE

- **Don't assume women need to have worked for a certain period of time to progress**
- **Be open to conversations about how to support women with childcare commitments to move forward**
- **Understand the scale of your staff members' commitment**
- **Create a clear progression plan and stick to it**
- **Encourage women to get off farm to network**



Sharing stories of women on farm



Many women starting out in the industry have few role models to look up to or reflect on their progression, so sharing success stories is important.

If a woman can see another woman already on the team, they're naturally going to find it easier to come and enquire about the business and the opportunities. Some ideas of how to do this are:

- Submit success stories to Farmers Weekly
- Consider using videos to showcase women's stories
- Encourage women to join their local farmers group or other associations
- Nominate staff for industry awards
- Bring a mix of representatives from your team to any industry events, particularly if you have a stand
- Discuss failure, barriers and ways in which they have been overcome.

Hannah Robson, agriculture and horticulture consultant at recruitment business More People, says having a mix of staff from your team at industry events is key: 'This makes the business so much more approachable.'

'It's also important to discuss failure, barriers and ways in which they have been overcome,' says Westpoint Farm Vets' Dr Ami Sawran.

'It may be a difficult read at times, but for us to fully appreciate the difficulties experienced by others we can relate to, those discussions must be had.'

CASE STUDY: SALLY WILLIAMS, BERWICKSHIRE DAIRY FARMER



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Following graduation from university, Sally returned to her 328ha family farm of Clackmae in the Scottish Borders to take day-to-day responsibility for the management of a 340-cow dairy herd.

She fully embraced technology to assist her in the efficient running of the herd, including the introduction of Lely Astronaut milking robots.

She believes that stories of women on farm should be shared, but that they don't always need to be 'success' stories.

'Sometimes just sharing that there are women working on farm is enough, and seeing never ending successes can make some feel inadequate or not confident to join when they are more than capable of joining the team and then growing with it,' she says.

Her farm is another which is bucking the dairy labour shortage trend. The last four people she has employed have come to her through word of mouth.

'At one point at home, our workforce was over 50% female,' she says. 'It now rarely drops below 35% and I put a lot of that down to our openness to employ women in the first place, but also because of our social media. People know that women on farm is our norm.'

Other benefits on offer to her staff include flexible working and a day off for children's birthdays. 'We've run the policy for over 10 years.

'Word definitely gets out within the industry that this is how Sally operates. I recognise that for my staff, their family are their world and that is why they come to work. They don't come to work because they love me. They come to work because they want to provide for their families.'



Encouraging mentoring

Research shows **mentoring is effective in reducing staff turnover** and that companies with mentoring programmes are more profitable than those without.

Jane Craigie, who runs an agricultural marketing and communications agency in Aberdeenshire and co-founded the Rural Youth Project, is highly experienced in mentoring – from a mentor and mentee perspective.

She said she believes the practice can bring commercial benefits to farm businesses. ‘In farming, doing things because they’ve always been done is a strength, but it can also be a weakness,’ she says.

‘Mentoring can encourage people to think they might want something different and how it might look different. It could be a different way of farming altogether.’

For both men and women, but especially women, Jane believes mentoring can also help with problems of self-confidence.

In a recent **Farmers Weekly survey** on the role of women in farming, 59% of women said a lack of self-confidence was preventing them from achieving their career goals, compared to just 13% of men.

There are many reasons why self-confidence suffers in women. The menopause is a perfect example of a time where previously confident women can end up leaving a workplace due to self-doubt and a lack of accommodation for their current needs.

Jane adds: ‘A mentor can really give you a safe space to have that conversation, to talk about the lack of confidence that you’ve got and what makes that better or worse and how it affects your behaviours.’



EXPERT INPUT PROVIDED BY:

- **Ewan Anderson, associate marketing director, Eden Scott recruitment agency**
- **Dr Ami Sawran, clinical director, Chelmsford branch of Westpoint Farm Vets**
- **Phil Garnham, The Ag Recruiter**
- **Sarah Hendry, director general, CLA**
- **Hannah Robson, agriculture and horticulture consultant, More People**
- **Sarah Want, agriculture and horticulture manager, More People**
- **Natalie Smith, communications manager, More People**
- **Jane Craigie, Jane Craigie Marketing**

CASE STUDY: ADM MILLING



ADM Milling runs a network of wheat flour mills across England, Wales and Scotland.

In 2023, the business ran an

internal ‘two-way’ mentoring programme that paired up senior executives, usually men, with younger, ‘high potentials’, usually women or from ethnic minorities.

The initiative gave both parties insight into the challenges each other faced.

Alistair Cross, the company’s UK milling managing director, took part in the initiative, which he brought to ADM from his previous employer, Associated British Foods. He says: ‘It’s really hard when you are a middle-aged man to put yourself in the shoes of a younger woman. With the best will in the world, there’s stuff you just don’t see until you are made aware of it. I learned about how people experience the world differently, based on their prior experiences. It also provided me with insight and real-world examples of challenges that others experience.’

