Brazil

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1. Had any of you worked in that country before this project?

*The John Deere Field Study in International Business involved investigating potential opportunities for Deere in Brazil’s sugarcane industry. The team were mainly based in the small city of Ribeirao Preto in Sao Paulo state. Sugarcane is a booming business in Brazil, to which John Deere currently provides agricultural equipment (harvesters, tractors, etc) to specifically address the needs of sugarcane mills. The team investigated other pieces of equipment and parts of the sugar cane value chain that could provide lucrative opportunities for John Deere.*

*Our team was very grateful to have Alex, our classmate, a native Brazilian. Alex grew up farming in Brazil and has several extended family members who grow sugar cane and run sugar mills. In Brazil, family is extremely important and Alex’s connections allowed us to gather extremely valuable data for our client. With the exception of Alex, none of us spoke Portuguese, a few of us spoke Spanish but we quickly learned that it was of no practical use. Brazilians have a tendency to speak fast with lots of expression. We relied heavily on Alex as our translator. Alex’s language and agricultural knowledge was invaluable as some of the concepts we learned about were very technical with no simple translation into English.*
2. What was it like working in a foreign country and how was it different from working in the states?

Our project involved a great deal of traveling through rural countryside to interview sugar farmers. It was the small things that really drove home the differences between work in Brazil and the US. First it was the pride that all of the mill workers took in their uniforms, despite the incredible heat. All of the employees looked crisp and clean in white pressed shirts and kaki pants. Second was the coffee. I expected the coffee to be great – we were in Brazil after all – but it was the way it was always served ceremoniously, in china cups with silver tea spoons and real sugar (sweetener is a banned substance in a sugar mill). Lastly, when we spoke with mills about equipment and service contracts, it really brought home how much any economy relies on its infrastructure. The lack of infrastructure presents a service challenge for John Deere. How can it quickly and efficiently service its rural sugar cane customers when almost all packages are routed through San Paulo?

3. Were there any surprises? Please elaborate.

Except for Alex, none of the team had worked in agriculture and we had not expected to see the sugar mills so well managed and efficiently run. We were surprised that all workers, including those cutting cane in the field, are entitled to healthcare benefits, sick pay and holiday pay. One can not help but wonder if Brazil can protect its low wage workers, why can’t the US?

Another surprise was the extent to which Brazil has sought to be energy independent. All cars now sold in Brazil are flex fuel (they can run on both gasoline and ethanol) and even regular gasoline has 25% ethanol in it. This really brings home the choice that the US has made to rely on gasoline. There are alternatives out there but they require huge changes in policy which are unattractive to the oil companies.

4. What did you do to immerse yourself in the local culture?

The Brazilians take their environment seriously. Currently about 60% of Brazil’s sugar cane is cut by hand and the cane is burnt prior to harvesting to remove sharp jagged leaves and pests from the field. Recently legislation was passed to phase out the burning of sugar cane prior to harvesting due to the environmental pollution this causes. This legislation promotes mechanization which provides an opportunity for John Deere, however, such legislation does provide challenge. It is not clear what will happen to the thousands of seasonal workers who currently cut cane.

Given that Brazil relies heavily on agriculture, food and eating is a large part of their culture. We ate quite a few of the Brazilian BBQ’s or “Churrasco” where you are challenged to eat as much as you can. The meats ranged from the finest beef fillets to chicken hearts and everything in between that could be skewered. Eating at a Brazilian BBQ is a marathon not a sprint and some good Argentinian wines were necessary to aid digestion. We were unfortunate to miss the Brazilian Carnival season which is held 40 days before Lent. The entire community engages in one huge party with costumes and dancing, celebrations lasting for days.

5. What key things did you learn from your overall experience?

My key take away from my Brazilian experience is that when a country is challenged and incentivised to be self sufficient in a resource, creative and efficient alternatives can be found.