
The interview: Cainthus CEO Aidan Connolly

Aidan Connolly is CEO of Cainthus, a computer vision company that transforms visual information into actionable insights for livestock farmers.

Connolly has also served as Chief Innovation Officer with Alltech, encompassing a 30-year career building a global network in food and agribusiness. In addition, Aidan has recently been accepted into the prestigious Forbes Technology Council.

What is Cainthus?

Cainthus is a computer vision company, using AI on farms to observe the behaviour, health and welfare of animals. We are ensuring that cows have adequate access to nutrients, both feed and water.

The benefits are that cows are more productive, healthy and ensures they have access to nutrition 24/7 for 365 days a year.

The feedback from farmers and farming industry has been extremely positive. They feel that this solves the challenges they have in today's world where farming is increasingly on a larger scale and the ability to observe the cows all the time is no longer possible. In effect Cainthus is providing an eye on their cows, except instead of the traditional 'Eye' this is now 'AI'.

How important has innovation been in and helping Cainthus to grow?

Innovation is critical to Cainthus. We are looking at science that has never existed and from that perspective we are inventing things that will change the world.

How important has networking been?

From its inception the founders of Cainthus understood that to be successful they need help from their community. While capable of doing tremendous things the power of a networks of friends, family and former colleagues was critical for the leaps they wanted to make. Dr Robin Johnston had contacts in the field of intelligence from his PhD and they understood the use of AI systems such as facial recognition of terrorists.

David Hunt's background was in investment business and knowing where to find money to start the business and Ross Hunt's management expertise, in scaling and turning around businesses. I

have spent my 30-year career building my network in food and agribusiness, with 20,000 connections on LinkedIn, and my COO Steve Kickert has started several businesses in the United States with successful exits. Ann Kehoe has 20 years of knowledge of marketing, branding, creation and event management. If given the chance to speak to young people in business I emphasize the value of meeting, keeping in contact with and curating your list of contacts.

Biggest break for the business to date?

The biggest breakthrough for Cainthus was the decision to pivot from observing crops to observing dairy cows. The founders had a farming background and so that was a major factor in their appreciation of the knowledge gaps that exist in farming, even more so in Dairy. While all areas of agriculture can benefit from computer vision and artificial intelligence technology, the opportunities for Cainthus are clearly greatest in cows.

What level of impact can Irish Agtech make in the world with companies such as Microgen Biotech?

Ireland has a tremendous number of agritech start-ups, disproportionate to our size, and companies such as Microgen, MagGrow and many other are looking at things we have never thought of looking at before. I am very bullish about the future of agritech in Ireland, and feel the connection Irish people have with the land and with farming makes it possible to develop entrepreneurs with genuine insights into the challenges farmers face and how those changes can be resolved using technology adapted to their real needs.

How has the power of branding helped the business?

Cainthus has been lucky to be featured in high profile media outlets such as the Wall Street Journal (twice), New Yorker magazine, Forbes Magazine, Irish media such as *The Irish Times*, *Farmers Journal* and the agritech business media such as *Ag Funder* and Tim Hammerich's podcast. *Physics Today* even featured our VP of Computer Vision, Dr Jane Cummings.

We have a very strong team; a strong message and people are excited by what we do. Cainthus is well on its way to becoming the brand most associated with AI in livestock.

Do you foresee any Irish agtech unicorn start-ups?

There are relatively few companies who truly have that ability; I believe Cainthus is one and I would suggest that there might be one or two other companies that are capable of being in that category but no more in my view than two, I would prefer not to name who they are for fear of jinxing them!

Whom do you admire in business and why?

Always been a big admirer of business people who think differently about the world, I am thinking of the leaders of, or organisations such as Netflix, Uber, Facebook even LinkedIn. The reality of today's world, especially in the west, that our patience with the hubris of visionary leaders is poor, and the churn of CEO's seems to be at an all time high. This doesn't excuse bad behaviours but we also need to be tolerant of a bad quarters results, or a change in the business cycle.

I enjoyed immensely seeing how many of the Chinese companies, Tencent, Alibaba and Baidu, have transformed business there and indeed the transformation in the Chinese environment since I started going there 6 years ago, which many westerners don't fully appreciate.

Which one skill do you wish you had?

I wish I had been better at sport, however, that might have made me not want to be involved in the business, and I really enjoy the business world immensely. Equally in everything I do wish I could be better, and certainly would love to have more time to build my skills, but you can't do everything. In many ways, knowing you could be better makes you work harder; and usually that is where the seeds of success can be.

What trends do you see in agtech?

Feeding the world has been the biggest issue. Sustainability increasingly becoming as big a concern and animal welfare is probably the next big issue for livestock. When we look at the potential for food to be a vehicle to improve human health this is something represents a huge opportunity for food, for farmers.

Nutritional science is complex and as our understanding of genomics, proteomics, metabolomics and nutrigenomics grows it is taking us into fields of understanding how food is the essence of health.

What is the best advice you have received?

I had an uncle in Dr Pearse Lyons, who was very successful. He set up and created the multibillion agribusiness giant Alltech. He was very much a believer in getting out there and meeting people face to face, and he wrote copious notes on the people he met and speedy follow up. He showed me the value of jumping on a plane or train to grasp opportunities quickly. He said the lifetime of the opportunity exists within the first 36 hours after it has been created. I try to follow in his footsteps in doing that.

I also met a senior marketing executive who had joined a co-op in the west of Ireland in the 1980s as an intern. He said he had requested before going to work each day for the first month to jump on a van making door to door milk deliveries. He said he learned so much from that experience he was still drawing on it twenty years.

What area is business do you enjoy most?

I enjoy travel and meeting people that's where I gained the most in my career and still much prefer going to the airport and travelling to the new marketplace, meeting new customers more than anything else I do. My kids joked that they found the home setting for my GPS was Atlanta airport.

What makes it worthwhile?

Firstly, being recognised for doing what you do well by your peers, even if that is not said in public, but is made in a personal comment. You know then you are hearing from people who appreciate what you have done, because they have experienced the same.

I have had the privilege to train several thousand people through company programs, hundreds of executives in management training through case studies and participated in conferences such as the Nuffield scholars, or at universities. It is a tremendous feeling when someone comes up to you a year or even a decade later to say that something they learned or heard from you made them think differently about their lives. It is a greater satisfaction than anything else you can receive.

Written by Brendan Byrne

Published 17 October, 2019