

Engaging the rural in sharing environmental ‘know how’: Insights into small to medium enterprises’ experiences of social networking

This study is a report on a pilot project supported by the Welsh Assembly Government, Academic Expertise for Business programme. In this study, the authors examine the use of a social media technology to engage rural small to medium enterprises (SMEs) in the climate change agenda. During a six month period the network attracted ninety six members made up of employees/owners of SMEs and relevant business support agencies who had come there to learn about, share or support environmental sustainable business practices.

Using Web 2.0 technologies to facilitate a community of practice and encourage business to business collaboration, local pioneers were identified and encouraged to share experiences of their activities related to reducing their businesses’ carbon footprints. This study reports on how the members engaged with the social network and critically explores the lessons learned from using social networking technologies.

This study draws its results from a mixed method research approach. Firstly, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with four members of the network that provided insight into the common and variant experiences of the participants through analysis of their lived experiences. Secondly, participant observation was used to further inform the study and also to provide verification of inferences drawn from the interviews. The study draws on both the interviewees’ and the researchers’ own experiences and provides a critical insight into the lessons learned from attempting to create and foster a sustainable social network.

Our findings suggest that Web 2.0 social media tools can be very useful in capturing tacit knowledge in a variety of media providing useful opportunities for a vicarious exchange of 'know how'. They also suggest that the network enabled business support agencies to communicate their services and stories of success. The paper concludes that whilst there are potential benefits the issue of initiation and ownership are important considerations.

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