

When a virtual success is a real failure: learning from the Enabling change and innovation webinar series

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Abstract. The Enabling change and innovation webinar series commenced in 2012. While initially targeting 30 FutureBeef extension officers, it was expanded to include anyone interested in the topic. It eventually attracted over 2000 people from 38 countries. Twenty-two webinars were delivered, receiving 6739 registrations of which 3152 (48%) attended live and the webinar recordings received over 60,000 views. A post-event survey cumulatively collected 1255 responses. The results indicated that the attendees found it relatively easy to join (average rating 9.4/10), use the audio (9.4) and interact (9.1). Attendees' knowledge levels moved from 4.7 to 7.2, a cumulative change of 25%. Very few FutureBeef staff actually attended the webinars, so the webinar series concluded in 2016, as it was deemed a low priority activity. So no matter how apparently successful an activity might be, it must still achieve the initial aims of the funder to be deemed a success.

Keywords: Web conference, project management, professional development.

Introduction

The *Enabling change and innovation webinar* series commenced in May 2012 to create greater awareness and better understanding of the processes used to enable change and innovation. The word 'extension' was avoided, as while it may be well-known in an agricultural context, its focus has changed over time from technology transfer to a more pluralistic, capacity building approach. This is embodied in the contemporary definition of extension being 'the process of enabling change in individuals, communities and industries involved with primary industries and natural resource management (NRM)' (State Extension Leaders Network 2006). Also, the term has little meaning in the wider Australian society, so words describing the outcome of extension were chosen. While initially targeting the 30 FutureBeef extension officers employed in Queensland by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF), it was expanded to include anyone interested in the topic in order to attract higher calibre presenters.

The target FutureBeef extension officers are geographically dispersed across the 1.8 million square kilometres of Queensland, Australia's second largest state. Providing services to the officers located across this area is a formidable challenge. While it is acknowledged that face-to-face engagement is usually better for professional development activities and certainly for building trust and rapport (Goldstein & Glueck 2016; Holmes & Kozlowski 2015), online technologies can complement them (Cipolletta, Frassoni & Faccio 2017; Min 2007) and provide an innovative means to connect in real-time without anyone needing to travel (James 2010).

With a limited budget, it was not possible to bring this team of professionals together for one, let alone several, training events. Thus webinars were chosen as the vehicle to deliver this series of professional development activities.

Methods

The webinars were delivered through an informal partnership with APEN which helped promote the events. GoToWebinar (gotowebinar.com), 'a webinar broadcasting tool that allows users to share presentations' (Citrix 2017) was used as the webinar delivery platform. However the actual platform is less important than the process used during the webinar to engage and interact with the participants. Many webinars use the 'talking head' approach, where the presenter essentially talks at the audience for most of the presentation and then takes a few questions at the end. In an effort to break this mould, the *Enabling change and innovation* webinars encouraged participation and engagement with the webinar attendees. Each webinar started several minutes before the official start time, and the webinar host engaged with the audience, showing them how to use the webinar system (the floating control panel and how to raise hands and type in questions). The audience was encouraged to use these to indicate whether the audio was clear and where they were located. The rationale was that by encouraging the audience to use these tools for relatively simple tasks at the start of the webinar, it would be more likely that they would use them during the webinar for more serious purposes. Also, starting early was intended to encourage punctual attendance unlike some webinars where the presenters seem to penalise the punctual attendees by waiting up to 10 minutes for latecomers to arrive. As an added bonus for the early attendees, the host shared photos of interesting but unrelated topics, such as his garden or murals in his city. The aim was

to help settle the audience, help them feel comfortable with the technology and be assured it was all working properly before the real event commenced.

To add greater ownership of the webinar series, attendees could nominate topics for future webinars. The UserVoice system (uservoice.com) was used to automate this process, allowing people to see existing topic suggestions and nominate new ones. Each user had 10 votes to allocate to their or other topics, so that the most popular topic would float to the top of the list.

The email marketing platform MailChimp (mailchimp.com) was used to automate the creation and distribution of emails, plus manage the sign-up process for subscribers and bounced emails.

Each webinar was recorded and the edited recording uploaded to YouTube (youtube.com) for anyone to view.

After each webinar concluded, an email was sent to all those who had registered for the event, thanking them for their interest. It included links to further resources, the webinar recording, an invitation to nominate future topics and to provide feedback on the event. SurveyMonkey (surveymonkey.com) was used to create the survey, collect responses and analyse the results.

It is estimated that each webinar delivered required 16 to 20 hours of work, which included:

- sourcing suitable topics and presenters
- developing the promotional material (email text and webinar registration page)
- distributing the promotional message via MailChimp
- training the presenter to use the GoToWebinar functionality
- delivering and recording the webinar
- editing the recording and uploading to YouTube
- creating a post-event questionnaire in SurveyMonkey
- creating and distributing a follow-up email message to those who registered
- analysing the data collected from the post-event survey and sending to the presenter.

Results

An analysis of the MailChimp subscriptions revealed the webinar series attracted 2144 individuals from the following 38 countries: Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Iran, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Korea, Malaysia, Mauritania, Monaco, Mongolia, Nepal, New Zealand, Nigeria, Philippines, Romania, Senegal, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Switzerland, The Netherlands, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, UK, USA and Vietnam. The top three countries were Australia with 1915 subscribers (89% of total), New Zealand with 98 (5%) and Canada with 45 (2%).

Across the 22 webinars delivered from May 2012 to November 2015, there were 6739 event registrations of which 3152 (48%) attended live, as detailed in Table 8. This is similar to the industry average of 46% for the attendance rate at webinars (ON24 2017). A total of 80 registrations were received from FutureBeef staff across the webinars (3% of overall registrations). The webinar recordings received 64,217 views (as at 16 June 2017), and the most popular one, *The seven secrets of good monitoring and evaluation*, received over 50,000 views.

Attendees were invited to complete an online survey at the conclusion of each webinar, and 1255 responses were collected (a 40% response rate). The results, detailed in

Table 9 indicated that the attendees found it relatively easy to join the webinar (average rating 9.4/10), use the audio (9.4/10) and interact during the webinar (9.1/10). On average the knowledge level of the attendees regarding the webinar topic moved from 4.7/10 to 7.2/10, a cumulative change of 25%. Their level of confidence to use the content moved from 4.6/10 to 6.8/10, a cumulative change of 22%. They rated their overall satisfaction with the content at 8.0/10, delivery at 8.4/10 and overall effectiveness of the events at 8.1/10.

Table 8. Details of each webinar

Webinar title	Date	Presenter	Registered	Attended	Attended (FB staff)	YouTube views
1. Predicting and improving adoption of agricultural innovations	16/05/12	Rick Llewellyn	200	130	8	746
2. The science of innovation: evidence based methods to drive creative thinking	4/07/12	Amantha Imber	330	172	3	1182
3. Designing effective surveys in three easy steps	14/08/12	Jeff Coutts	263	128	9	1420
4. Using online tools to engage the public	18/09/12	Matt Leighninger	269	154	4	101
5. Who gives a tweet about Twitter?	30/10/12	Cynthia Mahoney	249	146	5	203
6. The seven secrets of good monitoring and evaluation	19/03/13	Jess Dart	411	221	5	50654
7. Facilitation tips and tricks for newbies	21/05/13	Viv McWaters	302	152	3	1688
8. Designing projects for practice change and measuring impact	9/07/13	Kate Sargeant	291	150	8	160
9. Using an innovation systems approach to achieve remarkable change	19/09/13	Laurens Klerkx	202	92	4	1515
10. Using LinkedIn to your advantage	23/10/13	Ian Kininmonth, Gerard Byrne, Lisa Morell	288	154	3	193
11. Using community-based social marketing to enable behaviour change	29/10/13	Doug McKenzie-Mohr	228	128	1	1471
12. Using webinars to enable change	6/11/13	John James	212	109	2	159
13. AACREA.... a highly effective Argentine approach to enabling change	28/11/13	Richard Wakelin, Ian Plowman	246	117	2	259
14. Navigating the app development minefield	19/03/14	Tom McCue	318	132	3	142
15. Using Google's free products to enable change	4/06/14	Pru Cook	305	122	3	366
16. Managing an effective change project	6/08/14	Peter Hanrahan	348	159	3	117
17. The psychology of denial and our responses to climate change	6/11/14	Zoe Leviston	279	124	1	520
18. Seven secrets for successfully marketing your next event	25/02/15	Andrew Huffer	429	186	1	999
19. The neuroscience of change	29/07/15	Fiona Kerr	397	190	4	1111
20. Using the Diffusion of innovations theory to improve change	18/08/15	Les Robinson	288	134	2	964
21. Confessions of a MOOC developer and presenter	13/10/15	David Pannell	441	76	4	51
22. Using mind maps to reduce stress and unleash creativity	19/11/15	Jennifer Goddard	443	176	2	196
Total			6739	3152	80	64217

Table 9. Summary of evaluation results for all webinars

Item	Result (/10)
Ease: Joining webinar	9.4
Ease: Using audio	9.4
Ease: Interacting	9.1
Knowledge: before	4.7
Knowledge: after	7.2
% change	25%
Confidence: before	4.6
Confidence: after	6.8
% change	22%
Overall content	8.0
Overall delivery	8.4
Overall effectiveness	8.1

In the further comments area of the surveys, respondents remarked on the usefulness of the webinars, including the following statements: 'It didn't take much time out of my day but I got a lot out of it', 'I love this technology as I can squeeze it into a busy day regardless of where I am', and 'Thank you John - you are a shining light in a very dull world at the moment.'

Other comments referred to the ease of hearing high calibre speakers through the webinar platform: 'That an international expert was available in my own lounge room', 'Ability to listen to a world leading authority right from my desk and being able to ask questions and get answers!' and 'Wouldn't normally get such a high class facilitator to learn from in my isolated rural town.'

The ability of webinars to eliminate geographical distance was also appreciated: 'I'm looking forward to joining into future webinars—as long as you'll keep allowing us Canadians to participate', 'Amazing to be able to engage in development activity from my desk and then get straight back to work', and 'Fantastic way of informing so many people without the inconvenience and cost of travel'.

Other comments were made regarding the facilitation of the webinars: 'I thought the facilitation was excellent and would love to be able to manage such a large group of people so calmly and thoughtfully', 'I appreciated John's clear, unhurried approach and instructions in facilitating the webinar', and 'I also appreciated the time taken by John to introduce and facilitate the session. I liked the pace and the easy way we could interact with questions. Everything was well explained.'

Yet others commented on the webinar process being better than they expected: 'I was half-hearted, expecting a cumbersome and boring experience... you totally proved me wrong! I certainly will attend webinars from now on.'

The UserVoice system enabled 385 people to nominate new topics and vote on those and existing topics. A total of 81 ideas were proposed, of which 18 were delivered through the webinar series. The most popular topics suggested were: Mind mapping (which received 146 votes), Neuroscience of change (143 votes), and Planning effective extension (138 votes).

Discussion

This highly innovative approach to professional development used a combination of online tools to improve engagement and reduce travel and labour. MailChimp allowed interested people to subscribe to a mailing list and for the organiser to easily create and distribute invitations to the events. GoToWebinar allowed attendees to participate in the webinars from anywhere in the world with an Internet connection, on computers or mobile devices. YouTube then allowed the organiser to upload the webinar recordings which enabled 24/7 access to them, at a time and place that suited the viewer. SurveyMonkey allowed the organiser to easily create, distribute and analyse surveys. UserVoice enabled people to nominate and vote on topics of interest to themselves. The skilful integration of these online services not only improved the end result but greatly reduced the time required by the organiser to deliver the events.

The quantitative and qualitative data indicated this webinar series was highly valued by the attendees. However, even though over 2000 people around the world appreciated them, only a handful of FutureBeef staff actually attended the webinars, despite extensive promotion (invitations were sent by the organiser to staff for each and every webinar). Often the statewide manager would also send invitations to staff and encourage them to attend. The difficult decision to conclude the webinar series was made in February 2016, as it was deemed a low priority activity due to the low engagement of FutureBeef staff. While conducting a survey of the 30 FutureBeef staff to better understand why they didn't attend was considered, it was decided not to as the resultant response rate was expected to be very low. It is assumed that they were too busy, and not in the office regularly enough to watch the webinars. It might have also been due to them placing a low priority on increasing their extension skills.

It was decided the next phase of the webinars would focus on an internal webinar program, to be known as the FutureBeef Fusion webinar series. Four of these have now been conducted, with cumulative registrations of 69 with 37 attending live. The recordings have been viewed nine times. With less than 10 attendees on average, it is unsure whether this activity will continue.

Conclusion

Learning new technology is often seen as a bugbear, but when used wisely, can save time and effort. As demonstrated through this webinar series, it can remove geographic boundaries for attending professional development activities. An engaging, interactive webinar presentation can provide valued information to participants and significantly improve their knowledge of the topic and confidence in applying it. However the painful learning for the author was that no matter how apparently successful an activity might be, it must still achieve the initial aims of the funder to be deemed a success.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the funding and support of the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries and the informal partnership with APEN.

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