

Key social processes sustaining the farmer/advisor relationship

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Abstract. Farmers are managing their farm businesses whilst faced with emerging challenges and opportunities from climate variability, environmental, societal and economic forces. To help face these challenges farm advisers have become a sounding board and source of ideas and support. Whilst the role of farm advisers in providing this support has been described in the scholarly community, limited attention has been given to the nature of the farm-adviser relationship and how it is built and maintained. This is important, given the greater role farm advisers are expected to play in providing privatised extension services. This paper describes and analyses the building and maintenance of the farmer-advisor relationship from the perspective of farmers in the south-eastern Australian grains industry. Drawing on qualitative analysis of 30 in-depth interviews of farmers with an existing relationship with an agronomist, the processes of advisory relationship building, maintenance, and the nature of commitment to an adviser were explored. The farmers' commitment was influenced by levels of satisfaction with the service, previous investment in building the relationship, and whether there were advisory alternatives. This knowledge is useful for farmers in establishing and maintaining effective working relationships with their advisors, for advisors in understanding client expectations, and for agricultural policymakers and education providers in increasing demand for advisory services from farmers and in targeting farm advisor training. This paper makes a theoretical contribution by presenting a novel description of the social processes contributing to a committed farmer-adviser relationship.

Keywords: agronomist, advisor, extension, farmer, influence, relationship, climate change adaptation, learning, innovation

Introduction

Much of farmers' learning happens from their own practical experience and is informal and flexible (Hoffmann et al. 2007). But when problems (and opportunities) arise that are not part of their experience, they need to seek out external advice and support. Even practised farmers who have developed their own experience, skills, and networks benefit from extending their access to information, by seeking professional advice. For example, when farmers contend with unprecedented change, and when they do not have much relevant experience (such as when adapting to climate change) they may seek out one-on-one advisory services (Mills et al. 2017). This will also occur as farm size expands, as tasks on the farm become more specialised, and generally when farmers are faced with new challenges – all these things relate to a need for external advice and support. Half of all Australian grain farmers now regularly use a fee for service adviser; which they use for some farm decisions and not others (Nettle et al. 2018a).

Because publicly provided extension services in Australia have diminished, the private sector now provides most advisory services (Nettle et al. 2017, Paschen et al. 2017, Nettle et al. 2018c). An improved understanding of the relationship between farmers and their advisors from the perspective of farmers will show when an advisor is capable of conveying certain information (including challenging or contested information) to farmers, when other communication channels might be more appropriate, or when communication efforts might need to be tailored differently. For example, while it has been suggested that messages related to climate change, which are directed at farmers, are best received when they come from trusted advisors (Raymond & Robinson 2013), that is not likely to be the case with all farmers and all advisors.

This move toward private advisory services has two consequences related to the focus of this paper: 1) it is expected farmers will need to engage and form relationships with private sector advisers and 2) that the desirable changes in farm practices associated with environmental or other areas of land use and animal management happens through the relationship – so policy makers and other stakeholders need to understand the relationship to be able to use/network appropriately into these relationships.

The relationships between farmers, advisors and the traditional providers of scientific knowledge have changed over recent years. Farmers, in an effort to contend with the solving of complex and unfamiliar problems have, by necessity, become increasingly professional by accessing the same networks and much of the same information as their advisors. As farmers made these changes their advisors have also had to adjust their own roles (McKenzie 2013). They changed their focus from issues like identifying the barriers to adoption, to satisfying farmers' demand for knowledge by creating linkages between their clients and their own sources of knowledge (McKenzie 2013). The role of the advisor changed from the straightforward transfer of knowledge to also include

the co-production of knowledge with farmers. These changes brought their own problems because both farmers and their advisors are experts in their own ways (Hall & Kuiper 1998; Carr & Wilkinson 2005; Klerkx & Nettle 2013).

The advisor's relationship with a farmer can involve a recurrent interaction that results in them eventually becoming quite familiar with their clients' needs. This familiarity can lead to an increasingly productive relationship (Howells 2006) as the exchange of knowledge between farmers and agronomists becomes increasingly interactive and the growth of trust (Ilbery 2012; Sutherland et al. 2013) encourages the social bonds of friendship (Fisher 2013), which leads to greater levels of commitment (Beetles & Harris 2010).

The advice that farmers seek from agronomists ranges from the most basic, such as giving second opinions on farmers' ideas (Coutts et al. 2007) through to answering more demanding questions where the farmer expects the wisdom of someone with comprehensive knowledge applicable to the diverse problems that they are faced with (Nozick 1989; Fricke 2009).

The reasons farmers choose agronomists for farm advice that is seemingly beyond their agronomic training, rather than engage additional professionals,, is because they are likely to have had recurrent contact, similar interests, and an already established relationship based around the provision of advice that helps the farmer to achieve outcomes that they couldn't by themselves.

There is a large amount of literature about various aspects of farmers' use of agronomists, but it is mainly from the perspective of agronomists (Proctor et al. 2012). Not much of the literature focuses on the farmer-agronomist relationship from the perspective of the farmer. That which does, mostly does so in a developing country context and is therefore likely to have limited relevance to a developed country. The literature does not address how the farmers' relationships with their advisors develop over time. We aimed to fill this gap in knowledge by interviewing farmers about their experiences with their advisors.

This study is important because the strength of the farmer's commitment to the relationship is likely to limit the type and quantity of information that can be exchanged through the advisory relationship. For example, a farmer who has only just formed a relationship with an advisor may be unlikely to accept challenging or contested information such as that related to climate change. The farmer's commitment to the advisory relationship would be low and potentially damaged by confronting or contentious information.

This study is also important because this advisory relationship is often one of the most influential that farmers have for the transfer of knowledge and learning. It means that the advisor often has a privileged and influential position of providing trusted information and advice to the farmer, which helps to shape the farmer's knowledge and views of the world (Duck & Perlman 1985). Understanding this relationship is important for those policymakers and advisers who are seeking to influence farmers' actions.

We used the relationships between these concepts to form a conceptual framework of the social processes involved in the formation and maintenance of the farm-adviser relationship (see Figure 1). In the absence of a suitable conceptual framework to guide the data analysis we build on Hocutt's theoretical framework (1998) which presents: quality of alternatives, relative dependence, trust, social bonds, closeness, duration, and investment in the relationship as antecedents to relationship commitment between financial advisors and their clients. This is a relevant framework to build on because the farmer's relationship with their advisor is likely to be as important to them as the financial adviser's relationship with their clients.

The research question answered by this study is: what are the key social processes influencing the relationship of farmers with their advisors, how do they change over time, and how do these changes affect the performance of the relationship? In order to progress understanding of the farmer's perceptions of their relationship with their advisor in these areas a definition for the key processes in the farm-advisor relationship is needed.

Method

Qualitative interviewing was chosen for this study because it allowed the flexibility to explore the factors influencing farmers commitment to their advisory relationship. Interviewees were drawn from the sampling frame of: frequent users of independent agronomists, users of fee-for-service agronomists and those using agronomists that are provided free of charge by retailers of farm supplies. Agronomists were chosen for the focus of this study because they are the most commonly used type of farm advisor. The results are likely to be applicable to other types of farm advisor where the advisor provides advice that extends beyond their initial training.

Theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin 1990) was achieved after thirty face-to-face interviews were conducted by the first author with farmers from the south-eastern Australian cropping regions; SA Mallee, Victorian Mallee and Wimmera, NSW Central West and Riverine Plains. The purposively sampled interviewees were identified from agricultural media or selected from lists provided by agricultural consultants, agricultural resellers, or grower organizations. All interviewees had existing relationships with agronomists. The interviews took place on the interviewee's farm or at a location chosen by the interviewee from mid-March until the end of April 2012 and lasted an average of forty minutes. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

The in-depth unstructured qualitative interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and then analysed using the 'descriptive coding' method which involved summarising the key point of the piece of text being examined and coding using NVivo 9 qualitative analysis software (Saldana 2009). Interpreting the results started with reflexive journaling by the first author to record developing insights and ideas, before, during and after the interviews and throughout the NVivo analysis (Ezzy 2002; Bazeley 2007). The following results draw from the insights from the reflexive journal, combined with segments of representative text selected from the coded passages. Individual concepts related to aspects of the farmer-advisor relationship were synthesized from the existing literature and findings from this study and were then formed into a conceptual model identifying key processes and critical events that contributed to the building and maintenance of the farm-adviser relationship.

Results and discussion

In this section we present the findings from the qualitative analysis and provide quotes from the coded parts of the transcripts to help illustrate the findings. We discuss why farmers use agronomists as advisors in the first place, as this was found to underpin their expectations from the relationship. We then examine the relationship between farmers and agronomists in more detail by developing a model of the influences affecting farmer's commitment to their agronomist. In this next section we discuss the reasons for farmers' use of agronomists; enhancing management, reducing risk, assisting learning, and providing reassurance.

Enhancing management

Farmers' management burdens can be reduced by engaging an agronomist to take over some of the knowledge-related activities that would be difficult or time-consuming if they were to be done by the farmer. Those managing larger or more complex businesses use agronomists because they are more likely to be managing closer to the limit of their ability. Similarly, some farmers employ agronomists because they are seeking a better work-life balance by reducing some of the time they spend on management. One farmer complained that, '... there's so much knowledge out there ... where do you start and where do you stop ... you've got to live your life besides looking at a computer screen or reading magazines all the time'.

Other farmers want tactical planning advice: 'I manage the farm. I've also got to manage 6000 sheep ... so I don't have time to do in-depth paddock checks like I should be doing'.

Some farmers require a combination of strategic and tactical planning advice:

... he's involved with the paddock selection and variety selection that goes in those paddocks as far as crops are concerned. He's the one that monitors the paddocks for weeds and writes up the sprays that we need to use as far as controlling the weeds.

Reducing risk

Using agronomists is a risk management strategy for some farmers:

... the scale of our operation is reaching a stage where we just can't, you can't do everything yourself. I used to rely on my own judgement once, but not now. It's just getting too big. There's ... too much at stake.

One farmer suggested using an agronomist minimised their production risk because:

... our day to day job as farmers is to try and reduce our yield deduction as much as possible. At the start of the season you're going to have as good a crop as you can and then it just gets whittled down. It's all the little mistakes you make along the way so minimising those mistakes is pretty crucial ...

Assisting learning

Farmer-agronomist relationships are not just emotional interactions occurring between people but as 'networked events' that begin and then continue in a networked fashion with other farmers forming part of the network (Duck & Perlman 1985, p. x). Agronomists were valued by some farmers without suitable learning networks, or the time to devote to them, for their new ideas:

'I'll do the work; he can just tell me what to do. He's the one that can bring all the new ideas into the farm'.

Farmers use agronomists not just for their knowledge, but also because of their access to networks: '... he's up to date with all that stuff all the time and it's a large company. They go home and talk about what different chemicals they've been using and how they've worked out'.

Learning is also important for agronomists (Nettle et al. 2018b) who use their network to learn about things that individual farmers want to know, and in a way that farmers would find difficult to do by themselves. Some of this learning is from looking at a number of farms, at different times, in different places, and with different problems; '... he's been out to ten farms around and looked at everything. He's got a real handle on what to use and what not to use'.

The agronomist's advice is not solely focused on production issues but also includes the exchange of general information shared by network members. 'I can nearly pay his bill on what he saves me. I can ring him up and say "Has anyone bought any cheap fertiliser? Has anyone found any cheap chemical"?'.

Other than facilitating the sharing of knowledge from their networks agronomists also provide planning advice. Some farmers only require strategic planning advice:

...we have meetings ... probably four or five times a year ... there's always a post seeding visit, just a bit of a cruise around ... you always find something we can brush up on. And I think that's where the secret lies.

Farmers have varied problems and resources and therefore different planning needs from their use of agronomists. Responding to this, agronomists provide learning opportunities that range from the organised trials and extension activities that government departments had provided in the past, through to a focus on peer learning:

... he's got a good backup team ... their own research site ... their own trials ... canola varieties ... wheat varieties, oat varieties, barley varieties, then different fungicides, different sort of crop protection chemicals.

Peer learning fits with farmers' learning preferences, and are often opportunistic, informal, and timely: '... if he sees or comes across something he thinks will be of interest to everybody he says you know, how about we jump in two or three cars and go and have a look'. The learning that agronomists experience can also be shaped by farmers. One farmer encouraged their agronomist to participate in learning opportunities:

... the farmers are the ones that are actually seeing it all the time. ...the agronomists they might just see the edge of a paddock ... and that's all they see. So last year ... I took him out on the tractor ... we drove all over a lot of paddocks and he said he hadn't really been out on a place on the tractor before and having a look around.

Some of the co-learning takes the form of unplanned, incidental learning activities which involve observation, repetition, interaction with others, problem solving and needing to adapt to changed situations. The key characteristics of this form of learning, and why it is so valuable to both parties, is that it is 'situated, contextual, and social' (Kerka 2000, p. 3).

Providing reassurance

In addition to facilitating opportunities for developing and exchanging knowledge agronomists also provide farmers with added confidence, allowing them to take innovative actions more quickly than if they were making decisions by themselves: 'one thing they do stress is having the confidence to go and do it, and know that it's going to come out in the end'. For some farmers the agronomist's confidence can be reassuring and empowering: '... it's good to deal with a company that has got confidence in [my region] and they push that confidence out'.

Farmers use agronomists for a variety of reasons that can include reducing their management demands, reducing risk, facilitating learning or as reassurance for their own decisions. At the core of the relationship is the exchange and development of knowledge, the introduction of new ideas, learning, and co-learning. Agronomists provide reassurance that bolsters and builds the farmer's confidence in their own actions.

We have described the main reasons why farmers use advisers, and we now look at the farmer-advisor relationship in more detail, develop the insights gained from the study's qualitative analysis into primary concepts, include references in the literature to the concepts where appropriate, and construct a conceptual framework (see Figure 1) to explain the relationship between the concepts. The conceptual model shows the influences acting on the farmer's commitment to their relationship with their advisor.

Forming the concepts

The farmer's relationship with their agronomist starts slowly while the farmer is evaluating the agronomist's professional competence, but then changes and evolves as friendship, respect, and trust is built (Duck & Perlman 1985; Lewicki & Wiethoff 2000):

I think if you're going to use a consultant you need to have a certain rapport or relationship with them. We've been together 12 years now, so we have a friendship, I respect what he does and his advice. You have to trust them; you have to have faith in them.

Concept 1. Social bonds with the advisor—Strong social bonds will encourage farmers to have a greater level of commitment to the relationship with their advisor.

The farmer's social bonds with their advisor is about whether they have established a 'commercial friendship' (Price & Arnould 1999). If they have, the farmer can make some concessions if events occur that would be expected to cause their relationship to begin to waver. Without social bonds in these situations the farmer's satisfaction in their advisor can decline, impacting on their relationship. Commercial friendships involve affection, intimacy, social support and loyalty but are still limited by situational factors. At their core they are understood to be business relationships that provide social opportunities that allow friendships to develop (Price & Arnould 1999).

As the relationship grows the agronomist learns about the farmer's management history and management style, and where they can offer value to the farmer. For example, one farmer suggested that his agronomist might say 'grow lentils' or something like that and I might say, 'I'm not growing lentils, I've tried that once before' or something, you know so he won't even suggest it anymore'. High performing relationship between farmers and their agronomists are likely to involve the forming of social bonds. This means that the more similar their social characteristics, such as attitudes, interests, intelligence and personality traits (Verbrugge 1977) and communication styles, and assumptions are, the more likely that their relationship will be strong (Dimter et al. 2008). The social bonds of friendship have been an under researched topic in the area of professional relationships (Beetles & Harris 2010) and especially the farmer-advisor relationship.

Concept 2. Duration of the relationship—The longer a farmer and their advisor have been in a professional relationship the more resilient it will be, and the more likely it will be to continue. Longer relationships will be more robust because farmers will, over time, believe they have more in common with their advisors (Price & Arnould 1999) and therefore they will be less likely to end the relationship prematurely (Hocutt 1998).

Over time some farmers develop high levels of dependence on their agronomists, becoming habituated to their reassurance:

... we're going to plant canola and I know all the stuff because we've done ... the same thing every year for the last ten years probably, but ... I still had to make a phone call to make sure that the chemical I'm putting down is right.

On the one hand this could be seen as an unnecessary over-reliance on outside advice, but alternatively it could also be seen as a low-cost risk reduction strategy based on the farmer's confidence in their agronomist.

Concept 3. Relative dependence on the advisor—Farmers will continue a professional relationship with their advisor as long as they are receiving advice that they cannot easily obtain elsewhere. This concept is about the farmer's perceptions of their dependence on their agronomist. If some or all their service can easily be replaced by the farmer's own knowledge or other alternative sources of knowledge the farmer is likely to be less committed to the relationship (Ingram 2008).

In most cases the confidence of a farmer in the skills and knowledge of their agronomist grows from their continued interaction over time. Confidence in the abilities of their agronomist is different to trust in the agronomist, which is the farmer's expectation that their agronomist will do the right thing by them. This becomes relevant, for example, when the agronomist provides advice which requires spending large amounts of money.

Learning about each other's ways of doing things leads to a relationship that reduces transaction costs by minimising the amount of negotiation that the agronomist needs to undertake when giving advice. As the level of trust and confidence increase, the farmer's levels of control and oversight can also be relaxed. One farmer said:

... I'll ring him and say I want certain paddocks looked at. He'll go and look at it and give me a recommendation. I've got enough faith now; I just send my guys out and they can go and spray and do it.

As farmer's trust and confidence in their agronomist grows, it seems that their expectation of a continuing relationship also increases, which also means that they can invest more in the relationship:

... the only reason we've gone this way is because ... we trust him. ... it's just having someone that you are confident in that's going to be around for a while ... so I think it's more than just the agronomy ...

Concept 4. Trust and confidence in the advisor—Farmers who have high levels of trust and confidence in their advisor will be more likely to continue the relationship. Trust and confidence in the agronomist are about the farmer's perception of whether their advisor will have their best interests at heart, and their perception that their advisor will provide accurate information. When these key factors are present the relationship will be stronger. If trust and confidence are reduced, however, the farmer will be more likely to seek out alternative sources of information which means that their dependence on their advisor will be reduced relative to other sources of information, as will the strength of their relationship, and their commitment to that advisor.

This concept can be important because farmers judge the credibility of information campaigns that are aimed at them by referring to the opinions of people they trust; such as their advisors. A trusted advisor will have more influence in these situations.

The relationship between farmer and agronomist is a socially embedded relationship where social commitments overlay an initial economic arrangement. As the personal bonds of friendship grow the farmer's trust and confidence in the advisor develops and the relationship should become more resilient, and increasingly unlikely that it ends simply from minor problems.

Relationships also have a rebuilding cost if they are to be changed. One farmer said, '...I'd like to stick with the same person because he knows the farm and he knows where the weed hotspots are you've got to retrain a new bloke to do all that, so I stuck with the old bloke'.

Concept 5. Investment in building the relationship—The greater the investment that the farmer has made in the advisory relationship, the more likely it is to continue. The costs in time of establishing a new relationship are substantial, and include the time taken to educate the agronomist, and to convey the history of the business to a new agronomist (Hocutt 1998) as well as the investment in personal interaction, the learning about 'context, personal characteristics, preferences, beliefs, aspirations, and competencies' that the farmer makes. These investments all tend to keep the farmer involved in the relationship with their advisor (Klerx et al. 2006, p. 196).

The agronomist's approach to communication contributes to the farmer's satisfaction with the relationship. An example of this is farmers who find it important to have ready access to their agronomist's advice:

He's available on the phone or the Internet at any time. I could send him an e-mail at 10 o'clock at night and I know I've got an e-mail back by seven in the morning. I can ring him up on a Sunday, [or] any day.

The farmer-agronomist relationship is dynamic and evolves over time so that, as farmers gain experience, and their initial reasons for using an agronomist changes, they are also likely to demand higher levels of advice from their agronomist: '... I was paying him money to maybe tell me how to kill some weeds. Really wasn't using him in the end'.

Concept 6. Frequency and significance of interaction—Farmers' who have frequent communication with their advisor about important topics are more likely to continue the relationship. This concept is that when farmers have frequent interaction with their advisor, with high degrees of impact, they tend to have strong relationships (Kelley et al. 1983). In addition, frequent, recurrent interaction is likely to encourage mutual disclosure which is one of the components of a commercial friendship (Price & Arnould 1999).

When farmers become dissatisfied with their agronomists it is not just related to issues around the service that they receive like timeliness, or quality of advice (which can be hard for them to assess), but it can also be caused by perceptions of inequity and unfairness: '... we were getting no more time to us than the guy down the road that was only putting in 1000 acres, while we're putting over 9000 in'.

Perceptions of value and equity influence levels of satisfaction. When farmers do not get what they expect from their agronomist, and their levels of satisfaction decline enough, they will be prepared to accept the costs of changing their service provider: '... I wanted him to come and have a look at it and he said, "Oh I can't get there until next week" and I said, "that wasn't good enough" and that was the end'.

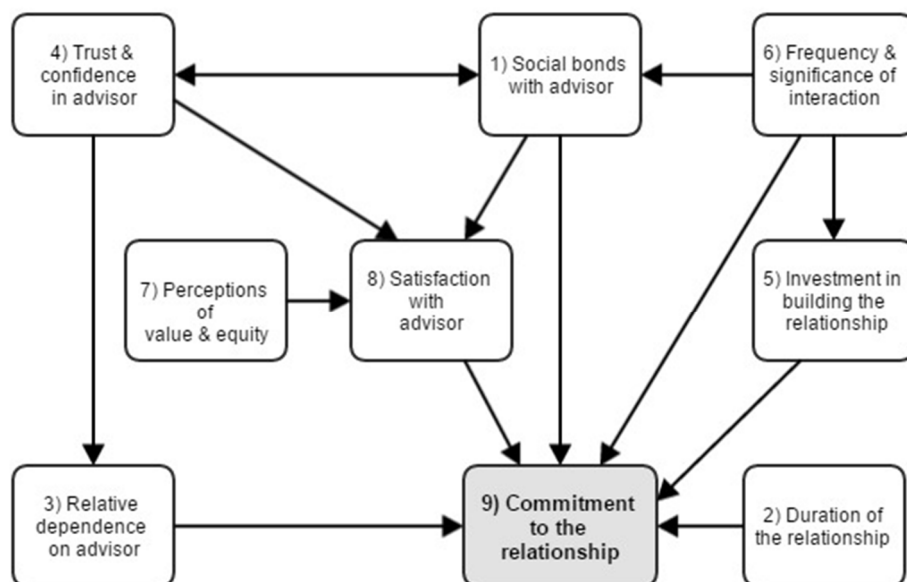
Concept 7. Perceptions of value and equity—Farmers who do not think that they are receiving value and being treated equitably are more likely to end the relationship with their advisor. This concept involves the farmer's assessment of the utility of the service they receive (based on their perceptions of what they have received for what they have paid) (Zeithaml 1988) and how it compares to that received by others is favourable they will tend to be more satisfied with their advisor (McDougall 2000).

The farmer's satisfaction with their agronomist can vary over time as problems are encountered and dealt with, successfully or not, and as their perceptions of the value of the service that they receive fluctuates: '... at times I sit down and think "gee, this is costing us a lot of money and this week I'm not happy with him". But a month later everything's fine'.

Some of farmer's perceptions of timeliness problems can arise as agronomists increase the number of clients that they work with and experience greater demands on their management time: '... it was really good for about the first three years ... then he started to get a little bit bigger and he was still doing everything by himself ... once you get too big it just gets a bit difficult'.

Concept 8. Satisfaction with advisor—The farmer's satisfaction with their advisor will be greater if they have high levels of social bonding, trust and confidence in them, and favourable perceptions of value and equity. The farmer's satisfaction with their advisor influences their future intentions with regard to the continuation of the relationship, but it is not the sole influence (McDougall 2000) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The farmer-adviser relationship commitment conceptual model



Farmers trust and confidence in their agronomist is an important contributor to their satisfaction with them. If their levels of trust and confidence in their advisor are low, they can be countered to some extent by strong social bonds or high perceptions of value and equity. However, when there is a high cost to switching caused by the cost of building a relationship, the impact of the farmer's satisfaction on their commitment to the relationship becomes relatively less important. The effect of a low switching cost is seen with agronomists working for chemical resellers who experience much weaker commitments from their clients. Farmers take time to build trust and confidence in their agronomist which means that there is a cost involved with rebuilding relationships if they change agronomists. One said: '... when you're sort of committed to an agronomist ... you just don't go and get another agronomist'.

The farmer's commitment to their advisory relationship is influenced by the eight concepts that we have discussed in the previous section of this paper. These concepts can be integrated into an over-arching concept that describes how they combine to influence commitment to the relationship.

Concept 9. Commitment to the relationship—A farmer's commitment to their advisor will remain strong if the parties interact frequently, in a meaningful way, over a long period of time, and with

high perceptions of equity and value, trust and confidence, with a social connection, and with levels of satisfaction to be maintained. Commitment to the relationship will continue if there has been significant investment in building the relationship, and they cannot more easily obtain the same information elsewhere.

While Hocutt's theoretical framework (1998) is focused on the likelihood of the dissolution of relationships in the service industry our model represents the distinctive and dynamic characteristics of the farmer-advisor relationship from the viewpoint of the farmer's expectations. The main difference in our model is that we have recognised the influence of the farmer's confidence in their advisor and added in the influence of farmers' perceptions of value and equity derived from the advisory relationship. We have also emphasised how the frequency and the importance of the interaction influences the farmer's social bonds with their advisor which also helps build confidence in the advisor. This relationship, which was not identified by Hocutt is an important influence on the farmer/advisor relationship.

Our conceptual framework hypothesises the relationships between the most pronounced influences on the farmer's commitment to the advisory relationship, not all possible influences. The research did not investigate how the relationship was initiated, but it did seek to establish how it was built and maintained. The early part of the relationship has much uncertainty because all the influences on the commitment to the relationship from the point of view of the farmer are low or provisional.

Social bonds with the advisor have a direct influence on the farmer's commitment to the relationship. If they are friends, the commitment to the relationship is likely to be stronger. Social bonds also feed into satisfaction with the advisor; so that if they are friends the farmer will be able to weather some dissatisfaction. Social bonds influence the farmers' trust and confidence in their advisor. If they are friends, they are likely to be more confident and trusting in their abilities. This also works in reverse as well so that farmers who are confident in and trust their advisor are also likely to form social bonds with them.

The length of time that the advisory relationship has existed directly influences the farmer's commitment to it. Relationships that have lasted for some time are less likely to end prematurely.

Farmer's relative dependence on their advisor has a direct influence on their commitment to the relationship. If there are no other alternatives the commitment will be stronger. Relative dependence is influenced by trust and confidence in the advisor. With high levels of trust and confidence in their advisor farmers are unlikely to seek out other sources of advisory support.

Farmers who have high levels of trust and confidence in their advisor will have greater levels of satisfaction with their advisor. Levels of satisfaction are influenced by the farmer's perceptions of value and whether that value matches what others are receiving. The farmer's satisfaction with their advisor will have a direct influence on their commitment to their advisory relationship.

The frequency and the importance of the interaction between the farmer and their advisor directly influences the commitment to the relationship. Farmers that are regularly seeking answers to important problems are likely to be strongly committed to the relationship. This regular interaction influences social bonds, and because it is an investment in time and training it also influences the investment in building the relationship which then goes on to have a direct influence on the farmer's commitment to the relationship.

Conclusion

We found that a farmer's commitment to the advisory relationship was increased:

- If the farmer's social bonds with their advisor were maintained or strengthened.
- As the length of time their professional relationship increased.
- If the farmer's relative dependence on the advisor was maintained or increased.
- If the farmer had made a large investment in building the relationship.
- If there frequent and salient interaction between the parties.
- If the farmer's satisfaction with their advisor was increasing.

We have described some of the factors which may cause a farmer's commitment to their advisory relationship to waver, but in most cases once a farmer establishes a relationship with an advisor, they are likely to continue the relationship. Even if they have growing dissatisfaction with their advisor they may continue the relationship for the reasons described in the conceptual framework; they already familiar with them, they don't know if there are better alternatives, and because they have switching costs that include building a new personal relationship and helping their advisor to learn about their context.

This study has made a theoretical contribution by identifying the key social processes sustaining the farmer-advisor relationship and forming them into a novel conceptual framework.

Farmers could refer to the farmer-advisor relationship commitment conceptual framework (see Figure 1) to gain a better understanding of possible reasons for their own feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their advisor. On the other hand, advisors could use the conceptual framework to guide their focus to areas where they may be able to strengthen their relationship with their clients. They could even use it as a framework for defining the way they interact with their clients. Policymakers could use the conceptual framework to understand that not all farmer-advisor relationships represent high-performing resilient opportunities for knowledge exchange. The complex, time and trust-dependent factors involved in advisor-farmer relationships need to be considered if expecting that policies can increase the use of advisors by farmers or use the existing network of advisor-farmer relationships as an extension delivery vehicle. This conceptual framework should also be relevant to other developed countries and other agricultural industries where farmers use advisors. The conceptual framework helps all parties to understand each other better so that they know what to do to encourage enduring relationships.

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