

Sharing Tourism Knowledge:
Regional Capacity Building Through Online Skills Delivery

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**SHARING TOURISM KNOWLEDGE:
REGIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH ONLINE SKILLS
DELIVERY**

ABSTRACT

Skills augmentation, through individual and collective learning, building destination relationships and network linkages through knowledge sharing and industry-wide benchmarking are internationally recognised as leading economic drivers for regional growth in general and the tourism industry in particular. The aim of this paper is to share the authors' initial insights into regional tourism industry network and capacity building via online skilling and knowledge sharing. Applying an ICT and Internet-enhanced platform for the delivery of business skills, this paper discusses an online learning pilot for micro tourism businesses in regional Australia designed to offer tourism information and skills development towards industry accreditation. While a tripartite university-government-industry partnership was successfully established to share knowledge towards regional capacity building and industry benchmarking, the authors also highlight silo politics, cultural differences, lack of leadership and lack of trust as some of the main barriers to effective and bilateral knowledge sharing towards regional industry capacity building.

Key words: network building, online learning, capacity building, knowledge sharing, regional development.

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INTRODUCTION

Skills augmentation, building destination relationships, linkages and industry-wide benchmarking are internationally recognised as leading economic drivers for economic growth in general and the tourism industry in particular (OECD, 2001). The Australian tourism industry has grown considerably over the past two decades to the point that it is now recognised as a significant international player in the world tourism market (Foster, 2000). Tourism generates an estimated 175,000 jobs for the Australian economy, many of which are regionally based (Australian Tourism Commission, 2001).

At the same time, the Australian industry structure has remained essentially unchanged, consisting of a minority of large businesses operating alongside a predominance of small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) and micro operators. In a study of training needs in the industry, 80-90% of the industry was identified as being comprised of small businesses, defined as employing less than twenty employees. Bed and Breakfast (B&B) operators, for example, are a significant growth industry in the regions (Beeton & Graetz, 2001).

Tourism operators are not required to have a tourism or business management qualification and hence there are no entry barriers for new operators. This often results in new entrants having little affinity with the industry; poor levels of business and industry knowledge; and a high turnover due to a high percentage of business failure (Hollick, 2003).

TOURISM SME SKILLS

Small tourism enterprises, much like other small enterprises, tend to be time and resource-poor, with their size being their main disadvantage (Werthner & Klein, 1999). Small and micro enterprises in Australia, as elsewhere, are characterised by a

low skill base, feelings of isolation, being located in peripheral regions where access to skills support is limited, and an inability to leave their business to continually improve their skills (Hollick, 2003). Research further indicates that micro businesses engage in little formal skills and intelligence gathering and rarely use external consultants due to resource constraints, lack of specialist expertise and size versus their perceived impact in the market place (Jameson, 2000). European research similarly reflects that small tourism operators generally do not have the time to attend training sessions by professional bodies. In addition, training is considered a cost rather than an investment for most small operators, who concentrate on their day-to-day operations and business management (Collins, Buhalis, & Peters, 2003).

SME inertia vis-à-vis business skilling combined with lack of small enterprise capacity and consequent lack of ability to engage effectively with other tourism stakeholders tends to result in loss of competitive advantage for the destination region and thus the wider economy as a whole (Hollick, 2003). Meanwhile, the push towards networked information and communication technologies (ICT), combined with increased customer expectations, has put extraordinary pressure on the information-centric and service-based tourism industry to extend conventional distribution channels to include the Internet as a major new marketing channel (Bloch & Segev, 1996). Implicit in this objective is that there is sufficient quality of product and service to match the expectations of international and increasingly travel-mature domestic visitors, extending the need for business skills to match such expectations.

Current research (Buhalis, 2003) into the implications of ICT for micro and small tourism firms indicates that small tourism firms have not yet reached the stage where they are ready to integrate business and ICT skills into daily management to streamline operations such as sales, marketing and distribution (Main, 2002). Similarly, they have yet to grasp the potential of learning and collaboration to aggregate capabilities and resources for knowledge sharing, economies of scale and scope (Braun, 2002b). There is widespread consensus that industry preparedness in terms of skills and training falls well short of the requirements to operate within a now ICT-driven sector (Braun, 2004; Buhalis, 2003; Danielle & Mistilis, 1999; Hollick, 2003; Jameson, 2000). As Evans et al. (2001) have noted, small tourism

firms may well remain lost in the electronic marketplace unless tourism SMEs acquire the skills needed to participate in the digital economy.

To date self-regulation efforts in the tourism sector have resulted in little evidence that the industry is capable of capacity building without external planning and intervention (Hollick, 2003). With the characteristics of the industry being predominantly micro, consideration should hence be given to helping small firms to be able to respond to market needs by adopting business systems that allow them to increase their skills and respond to an increasingly savvy consumer. Indeed, in an increasingly global tourism market, it seems essential for Australian tourism firms to strive for continual improvement in their performance.

Considered vital to the long-term growth and sustainability of the industry, national and state level efforts to improve quality of product and service delivery include nationally recognised accreditation and training programs. In 1998 State tourism bodies agreed to create the Australian Tourism Accreditation Authority, a national framework for industry accreditation programs. However, the varying degrees of interest and commitment from States to accreditation have made the establishment of a national framework difficult. Based on principles established by the Tourism Accreditation Board of Victoria, a model was eventually agreed upon which allowed State authorities to retain a role in the approval process (Foster, 2000). However, in Victoria alone, many small operators have remained uncommitted to improving standards and professionalism. As there is still relatively little understanding of the importance of industry standards, the state's peak tourism body is committed to raising awareness of and improving industry standards (Tourism Victoria, 2002). In addition, the federal government announced \$2 million Australian Government initiative of the Tourism White Paper towards setting up a national voluntary tourism accreditation program to improve tourism industry performance and encourage tourism growth in Australia's region (DITR, 2003). Following a National Accreditation Forum in July 2003, the Australian Government, together with State, Territory and Industry representatives established a National Tourism Accreditation Working Group (NTAWG) to help address the constraints to tourism accreditation in Australia (DITR, 2003).

One way of raising industry standards is through training and the development of national benchmark and best practice standards that can be displayed by businesses that have reached satisfactory standards of practice (DITR, 2003). To that end, a pilot skilling project was recently launched which seeks to develop a more effective capacity building model for tourism enterprises. The venture addresses a major gap in current training initiatives by performing a coordination role between the diversity of stakeholders in the provision of tourism capacity building. The pilot program provides a practical opportunity to respond to the needs of today's small tourism firms by focusing on critical resources (knowledge and expertise) (OECD, 2001).

The goal of the pilot project is to raise industry standards and move away from ineffective silo approaches to industry training and capacity building. Tying directly into accreditation, the pilot program specifically aims to contribute to continuous improvement of industry performance and industry standards by creating tourism businesses that are professional in their approach and generate consumer confidence. By aligning its content to the national accreditation framework, which is currently being developed by the NTAWG through a series of workshops, the project expects to make a significant contribution towards an effective and sustainable national tourism accreditation framework.

The pilot program seeks to overcome micro-operator barriers to skilling through the creation of a community of practice within the pilot region as part of the skilling process (Florida, 2002). Communities of practice are informal groups of people who regularly share their expertise and experiences, both online and offline (Wenger, Snyder, & William, 2000). Building on the concept that global positioning and competitive advantage for small business may be achieved through collaborative knowledge sharing in a regional learning environment (Lundvall & Johnson, 1994), the pilot explores the potential of a timely synergy between connectivity and collaborative business models for SMEs (OECD 2001) in embracing knowledge community practices.

THE PILOT PROJECT

The pilot project is being conducted in the Goldfields region of Victoria. The project, which goes by the name **bbonline**¹, targets 520 micro tourism enterprise owners and managers in the Goldfields region of Victoria, Australia. The pilot is a flexibly delivered capacity building and business skills development program for small and micro tourism enterprises. It aims to augment tourism operators' business skills and facilitate the uptake of voluntary industry accreditation. Funded by the Australian government body AusIndustry under the 2003 Small Business Enterprise Culture Program (SBCEP), the pilot was developed by the Centre for Regional Innovation & Competitiveness (CRIC) at the University of Ballarat in conjunction with the Better Business Tourism Accreditation Program (Victorian branch).

The Goldfields are centrally located, just over one hour's drive North-West of Melbourne, the capital of Victoria, with a number of highway access points via the Western Highway which connects the major metropolitan areas of Melbourne and Adelaide. The region includes two major regional centres, Ballarat and Bendigo, and the Central Highlands.

The region was chosen as the pilot study area as it was a sufficiently mature destination with a solid infrastructure of tourism management and support, diversity of product and ICT for the model to proceed. The region has also experienced impressive growth of micro tourism businesses, especially of Bed & Breakfast and self-contained accommodation. The Goldfields are considered one of Australia's strongest heritage and product regions drawing in excess of 2.8 million visitors per annum. The Goldfield's region's diverse and comprehensive range of geographical, historical and topographical features include the 19th century gold rush history; strong links with Australian nationhood and educational aspects of the region; extensive,

¹ The pilot title represents the concept of Building a Better Business, through online assistance. The program content augments and enhances the national Better Business Tourism Accreditation Program, which is marketed to tourism operators as a business skills development program, rather than to consumers as a product quality guarantee at this stage.

intact architectural structures; historic attractions, museums galleries, natural attractions; wineries and cultivated flora and fauna.

Given the growing number of women in new tourism start up ventures (Tourism Victoria 2003), this project particularly aims to augment the capacity and skills of women in micro tourism businesses. There are approximately 1,500 new and established tourism operators within the region and the pilot will target 25% of these.

Building on the concept that tourism growth lies in the industry's ability to deliver high quality products and services by meeting and exceeding customer expectations from arrival to departure, the pilot program aims to contribute to continuous improvement of industry performance and industry standards by creating tourism businesses that are professional in their approach and generate consumer confidence. **bbbonline** (www.bbbonline.com.au) is an Internet-enhanced program which provides quality industry training mainly targeted to the needs of micro tourism operators.

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●● welcome to **bbbonline**

bbbonline is a business skills pilot program based on tourism industry accreditation for micro tourism operators being held in the Goldfields (Central Highlands and Central Victoria) region of Victoria, Australia from August 2004 to July 2005. The pilot region includes the towns of Ballarat, Bendigo, Creswick, Clunes, Castlemaine, Daylesford and Maldon.

bbbonline offers tourism information and skills development via the Internet, on CD-ROM and in flexible learning support workshops. Operators can participate either informally based on their needs or complete the documentation for tourism industry accreditation.

Access to mentors is available for operators who wish to complete tourism industry accreditation.

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The pilot features best-practice examples for bed and breakfast (B&B) operators, which is accessible to operators upon registration for the program at a cost of \$140 per operator. Content includes business profiling; business compliance (licensing, permits); insurance compliance (needs & policies); business, marketing & communications planning; customer service; business operating systems; human resource management; risk management; economic sustainability & financial systems; environmental sustainability; social & cultural sustainability; and continuous improvement. Content is made available online or CD-ROM format and is underpinned by information, workshop, phone and mentor support.

The online design facilitates web linkages to information sources and the most recent, accurate information. Smart forms tailor information dynamically to sector and business size needs, e.g., once an operator has identified his/herself as a (micro) B&B operator, micro and sector-specific information, resources and links are displayed.



ICT and the Internet are believed to be ideally suited to training small and micro tourism operators (Buhalis 2003), as it allows small business to access cost effective training and learn anytime they want without disrupting normal business operations.

Especially when it involves the use of online environments, flexible learning can boost opportunities for the development of e-commerce, e-business and skills (Mitchell, 2003). For small businesses that lack time to travel long distances to learning venues, ICT enables them to study according to their seasonability and other operational management commitments they may have. Other beneficial factors include quick and easy access to course content and up to date information (Collins et al., 2003).

Online learning, also referred to as e-learning, is defined as learning that takes place anytime someone uses electronic means for gathering information either with (synchronous learning) or without another live person (asynchronous learning) present (Zhang & Nunamaker, 2003). E-learning can include web-based technologies, CD-ROMS, DVDs and videoconferencing. Some disadvantages of e-learning include the operators' initial set-up and access to infrastructure cost; operators may find it too impersonal; and participants need a high level of discipline (Collins et al., 2003). While the adoption and innovative use of computer-mediated communication technologies can have positive outcomes for individual learners and for regional development, it should also be noted that online learning is still in its infancy. Online learning is expected to grow dramatically with the increased understanding that distribution of and sharing of knowledge via online environments is a key to successful relationship building.

Although the **bbonline** learning program is designed to lead to formal tourism accreditation, it may also be accessed on an informal or skilling needs basis. **bbonline** is not a stand-alone training program. The developers of the program have successfully formulated partnerships across state and regional (Goldfields) tourism bodies. Partners in the program include Tourism Victoria, Better Business Tourism Accreditation Program, Goldfields Tourism, Ballarat Tourism, Bendigo Tourism and Hepburn Shire Tourism. By conducting continuous consultation with the project partners and working with the state accreditation body to ensure that the latest national standards for accreditation are being adopted and included in the program, **bbonline** is able to offer comprehensive skill development that aligns with national tourism accreditation requirements. Thus, the program can offer access to a recognised qualification such as accreditation.

Cognizant of the fact that small business managers are often time- and resource-poor and many SME have yet to embrace ICT beyond email, knowledge transfer involves multi-modal, e.g. face-to-face, individual mentoring, CD-ROM based and call assisted business learning. Under the theme, '*Any Time, Any Where, Any Place*', the program maximises operator involvement at any time of their choosing. Introductory face-to-face workshops have been provided to familiarise tourism operators with the online learning environment and provide them with the technical tools to engage in their own learning. The use of online technologies enables learner access to current content, online interaction and community knowledge building and best practice through a 'knowledge bank' depository, while the operator remains physically within the business. By using a learning region (Braun, 2002a) and community of practise approach (Wenger, 1998) tourism operators can effectively learn with and from each other to leverage their knowledge of business and best practise to become sustainable businesses in their own right and thereby enhancing whole-of-destination of region knowledge. The development of a regional learning network, in the course of program delivery, will be facilitated by central access to online interaction.

Documentation collected during the course of the project will provide a unique insight into the learning styles and progressive business acumen of small business. It is anticipated that the project will develop a replicable learning model for micro and SME businesses that will be applicable to tourism regions outside Victoria and Australia, as well as other service sector industries. Operators will also be invited to exchange experiences and provide feedback on the pilot at a regional face-to-face action-learning seminar at the end of the pilot. Since networks have the potential to be a pro-active investment in trust building and reduce the risk of opportunistic competitive behaviour (Tremblay (1998), it is anticipated that repeated operator interaction through online interaction, workshops and seminars will enhance social capital among firms and favourably contribute to destination building.

Pilot project outcomes focus on the enhancement of small business viability, creation of regional competitive advantage and reduction of the current high rate of business failure in the tourism industry. University-led pilot content design and facilitated interaction outcomes focus on augmented business, marketing and operational skills

for small and micro tourism firms; a better understanding of destination interdependencies, such as regional supply chain and value chain complementarities and placing the destination in the global environment; initial strategies for collaboration; networking and trust; and a broader understanding of the requirements to build competitive destinations in a competitive market. Pilot outcomes will be determined by operators' committed interest to learning and network interaction.

ISSUES IDENTIFIED TO DATE

The pilot was launched in July 2004 and will run until December 2005. Initial awareness raising and the first round of workshops have taken place. No action learning seminars have taken place as of yet. Workshops introducing the program to a total of 64 micro tourism operators have been conducted across the region have raised a number of issues reflecting the different cultures varying levels of maturity of the destination areas. Pilot awareness raising throughout the Goldfields region has also brought to light significant variance in ICT facilities and capacity by operators with new industry entrants, not yet engaged with their local associations, revealing low connectedness. In some instances operators did not have a computer in their business. As a result of the introduction to the program they saw a reason to acquire online infrastructure. Thus the range of multi-modal learning options (CD-ROM, online, supported by telephone mentoring and the workshops) provided significant appeal for a still disparate industry.

For operators in the Bendigo and Ballarat regions the link between the **bbonline** program and tourism industry accreditation was not necessarily seen as an advantage. In these mature tourism destination, where tourism leadership for accreditation has been strong for many years, operators and the tourism area managers have felt let down by the lack of progress toward formal recognition of the industry and subsequently have moved toward a focus on skills building. Operators, in these areas did not express a significant desire at this stage to proceed to accreditation. Operators in the Daylesford area, by contrast, seemed more interested in industry accreditation for the commercial benefits it offers: e.g., reduced costs for state sponsored online distribution and cooperative marketing campaigns.

The pilot program offers operators the option of saving their progress either online or on their personal hard drive. Operators in all pilot program areas expressed concerns about: the security of their personal business planning and marketing details and other materials being entered onto an online server; their ability to move data from their business to home office; and their ability to access business data for later retrieval such as renewal of accreditation or other commercial purposes

The major benefits perceived by operators across the pilot region were the time saving aspects demonstrated in the smart form concept, reflecting the view that time is 'the new distance'. Operators were also drawn in by the best practise examples and direct links to the online resources to bring and keep them up to date with industry information and developments. At this early stage of the pilot, operators showed little interest in collaborative learning, or using the website for operator interaction, indicating they had not yet fully embraced the idea that they were part of a 'learning community' with an opportunity towards collective destination building. The latter may also be a reflection of the seemingly universal atomistic nature of the tourism industry.

From a project development point of view, while a tripartite university-government-industry partnership was successfully established to share knowledge towards regional capacity building and industry benchmarking, the authors also highlight silo politics, cultural differences, lack of leadership and lack of trust as some of the main barriers to effective and bilateral knowledge sharing towards regional industry capacity building. Indeed, collaboration between the various institutions and agencies proved to be much more complex than initially anticipated. Partners had different agendas and timelines. With the Victorian accreditation program undergoing a substantial review, there was little point in developing the program with 'old' content. As a result, the rollout of the program was delayed by some six months. In addition, it took a considerable length of time and a number of meetings to build enough trust between partners to start sharing knowledge. Even then, there were intellectual property issues that each organisation had to content with. It became clear that organisations had distinctly different cultures, played out in the control of timing and exchange of content. Some actors equated 'content' with 'power' and were reluctant

to part with content until they were sure that such content would be framed within their desired organisational context. This resulted in slow progress in terms of content integration. Last but not least, as with any pilot project, there were teething problems in creating the appropriate delivery mechanisms. Creating a user-friendly interface for an enhanced learning experience is an art in itself and despite extensive instructional design consultation; the technological capability of the pilot program left some to be desired and indeed continues to be a work in progress.

CONCLUSION

In response to leading economic drivers for economic growth in general and the tourism industry in particular, the **bbonline** pilot, in collaboration with government and industry, seeks to explore the advantages of online learning to advance micro operator skills augmentation, build destination relationships and contribute to industry-wide benchmarking. The project is the first in its kind to take an inclusive approach to training by adopting a content coordinating role between the diversity of tourism bodies, managers and operators. For tourism SMEs initial pilot value appears to be in gaining one-stop access to industry information, the debunking of complex business jargon, and obtaining ICT skills in the process.

Pilot issues identified to date range from trust between project partners, to destination maturity, to technology infrastructure and operator technology adoption levels, to skills augmentation and accreditation interest, which indicates ample scope for further study. This paper is but an initial report in an ongoing pilot and additional issues will no doubt come to the fore, which where possible will be incorporated into the program. The goal of the pilot is create a tool that may in time be adopted for national accreditation purposes, as online learning has the capacity to facilitate operator knowledge of best practise, business sustainability and thus contribute to triple bottom line outcomes for individual tourism businesses and thereby their destinations. By offering skills development through linkages with local networks and regional training institutions, it is anticipated that operators will be in a better position to respond to extended distribution channels within the knowledge economy and deliver quality of product and service to match the expectations of international and increasingly travel-mature domestic visitors.

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