

Effective e-commerce



Associate Professor Rob McGregor and Associate Professor Ann Hodgkinson with their book on small business and technology.
Picture: WAYNE VENABLES

Research

University of Wollongong Associate Professor **Rob McGregor** has published some interesting findings relating to the use of the internet and e-commerce in small businesses both within Australia and overseas.

My area of research over the past seven to eight years has been the use of the internet and e-commerce in small to medium businesses. This research has included three of the largest surveys ever undertaken in Sweden, Australia and the United States.

Apart from a number of international conference and journal articles, the research has resulted in two books, *Small Business Clustering*

Technologies, co-edited with Associate Professor Ann Hodgkinson, School of Economics and Information Systems and *E-commerce in Regional Small Businesses* (due out early next year), co-authored with Associate Professor Lejla Vrazalic, University of Wollongong (UOW), Dubai.

The first book examines the development and role of groups of small businesses, or clusters, working and operating together. It includes studies from Finland, Canada, Turkey, Italy, New Zealand and Australia. The second book concentrates on the studies from Sweden, Australia and the US.

Small businesses operate very differently from larger businesses and this means that factors such as availability of finance, business sector, market focus and business skills need to be considered when examining the use of the internet or e-commerce.

Unfortunately, many small businesses and national governments think that using the internet and

e-commerce simply requires the owner/manager to gain the necessary expertise with computers and to then purchase the appropriate software.

Our studies have shown that it is not the technical expertise that is important, but organisational and entrepreneurial expertise.

The studies have revealed that businesses which do not adequately plan for e-commerce, often increase their workload, reduce their sales and lose customers. For those small businesses that do undertake pre-e-commerce planning, the benefits have been quite substantial.

The research has also presented a number of surprises. One interesting finding is that Australian small businesses that are managed by women tend to be more focused on organisational concerns, while those managed by men are more focused on the technical problems. What is even more surprising is that in Sweden and the US, the opposite is the case.

Over the past 12 months, my research has begun to focus on regional medical practices, particularly the use of the internet in general practice. This focus has included surveys of GPs in the Illawarra, Ballarat, Rockhampton, south-east NSW and the Hunter.

While still in its early stages, the research has again shown some crucial differences between regional and rural practices and between male and female GPs and their aspirations and use of the internet. As with the small to medium businesses, this study is soon to be repeated in Sweden and the US.

UOW, through international studies like these, has become a major contributor to the understanding of small businesses. We already have a number of students undertaking higher research degrees in both the small-business sector and general practice.

The Government has shown some interest in our findings and believes our results have implications for policies that relate to small business.

Q&A

Are you getting anywhere?

Sure. Each new survey or set of interviews adds to our knowledge of how small businesses adopt and use e-commerce. Apparently others must think we are getting somewhere as Lejla and I were recipients of the Prime Minister's Award for Research in Small Business two years ago.

Will it save the world? No, but it might save many small business owner/managers a great deal of grief and frustration when adopting and using e-commerce.

Best part of your research?

The opportunity to research an area of interest is valuable to me. I get a "buzz" out of applying statistics to new small business data and discovering something I didn't previously know. I get even more of a buzz if no-one else knew it either.

Have you had a "Eureka" experience? There is always something that comes out of large survey data that you didn't expect. The difference in approach to e-commerce by men and women was one such moment.

Has it made you rich?

Financially, no. But I'm enjoying what I do and I guess there's a richness in that.

What did you want to be when you were a kid?

Either one of the Beatles or a pharmacist. How things change!


Has your career followed a straight line?

Not at all. I trained to be a high school teacher but when the Department of Education lost my details back in the '70s I moved into computing. After rising to manager in a London software firm I decided to get into academia and have been doing it for the past 27 years.

Advice for young researchers:


Research can be frustrating, particularly when people around you are not jumping up and down quite as excitedly as you seem to be.

Be patient, try and collaborate with others and work on establishing a strong track record of reputable publications.



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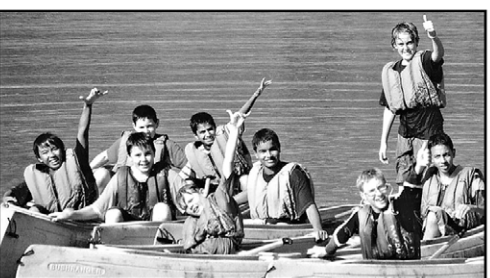


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