An internet portal for the development of community oriented entrepreneurship

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Abstract

In conjunction with the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation an internet portal 'community oriented entrepreneurship' was developed. The portal is meant to develop entrepreneurial skills of (future) farmers and enable them to maintain their licence to operate in an increasingly complex and urban society, with competing claims on agricultural areas and production methods. The portal contains tools, experiences and information, that can be used by farmers directly, but the main target user group are intermediaries, such as teachers and advisors. Feedback on the portal prototype changed the portal to a more simplified structure, focussing on content that delivers practical results for the entrepreneur and their business strategy. In order to continuously meet the demands of the users of the portal, it is preferable to transfer ownership of the portal to farmers organisations or teachers associations, so that continuous improvement of the portal can be operationalized by the user community itself.

Introduction

In this paper the development of an internet portal (portal community oriented entrepreneurship) is described which has the goal to develop the entrepreneurial skills of farmers. The content of the portal focuses on entrepreneurial skills needed off-farm when dealing with the social and local environment. The reasoning is that contacts with stakeholders around the farm often connects to on-farm business strategy. The requirement of this portal can be understood from three points of view: development of entrepreneurial skills, dealing with competing claims on rural areas and obtaining a license to operate. These three elements will be described in this introduction.

Entrepreneurial skills

Important skills for a farmer to succeed in business can be categorised in basic requirements and entrepreneurial skills (de Wolf et.al. 2007). The basic requirements, like professional skills and management skills, focus on the daily business processes including/for example production, technical, management, administration and planning skills. Entrepreneurial skills can be divided in three types of skills. These are opportunity skills (e.g. recognising opportunities, innovation and risk management skills), strategic skills (e.g. receive and use feedback, conceptual and strategic decision making skills) and co-operation skills (e.g. networking, team-working and leadership skills). The entrepreneurial skills are characterised by a focus on the development of the farm

business. As argued by de Wolf et. al. (2007) entrepreneurial skills are important to succeed in business *on* a farm, however they are often used in contacts with stakeholders *around* the farm.

Competing claims

According to OECD indicators The Netherlands is predominantly urban and lacks truly rural areas (Brezzi et. al. 2011). From an international point of view all Dutch farmers are farming in urban regions. This is increasingly leading to claims of society on areas for housing, recreation or industry, competing with use of those areas for agricultural production. Also views on agricultural production methods of farmers and citizens are often conflicting. This results in decreasing surface area that is used for agriculture or stricter regulations on environmental issues. All kinds of socio-economic changes and societal pressures, locally, nationally and internationally, determine the opportunities for continuity of growth of a farm. The farmer has to respond to the claims and wishes of an increasing number of stakeholders, in order to remain competitive, functional and sustainable.

Licence to operate

According to the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation a society oriented attitude is essential for the farmer of the future to be successful. The merge of the Ministries of Economic Affairs and Agriculture (2010) led to a change in policy. Now policies are focussing on innovation in nine top industry sectors in order to make the Dutch economy accelerate. One of these sectors is Agro&Food. In the policy report (Topsector Agro&Food, 2011), with the ambitions and goals for the development of this sector, it is stated that success can only be achieved if there is a licence to operate. For this licence, sustainability issues have to be addressed and there has to be an open dialogue with society. In the past the sector did not have enough attention for obtaining the licence to operate, according to the report. Making contact with society proactively and increasing transparency are conditional to re-obtaining the licence to operate. Multifunctional agriculture, with services like green care, recreation, nature conservation, already bridges the gap between producer and consumer. However, multifunctional farmers cannot obtain a licence to operate for the whole Agro&Food sector. But they can inspire, since they often make good examples of how to involve local communities and resources in their enterprise.

Licenses to operate can be obtained by meeting the needs and expectations that emerge from neighbourhoods, environmental groups, community members, and other demands of the surrounding civil society on a business enterprise (Gunningham et. al. 2004). Therefore the license

to operate goes beyond permits from governments. It is focussing more or less on self-regulated behaviour between a company and community's demands and expectations. The community consists of a wide range of stakeholders with different concerns about a company or an industry. Society at large needs products that farmers provide because people want to consume food. Therefore, the farming sector at large is serving a crucial function within society. The acceptance to produce for this function is obtained partially on the institutional level by activities of product boards and farmers organisations responding to public claims and perceptions. However, for an individual farming enterprise of subsector of industry societies' acceptance is neither automatic nor unconditional. When businesses do not succeed in obtaining their licence to operate, they have less flexibility to develop the business. With the community oriented entrepreneurship portal we focus on developing competences and skills which enable farmers to obtain their licence to operate.

The paragraphs about license to operate, competing claims and entrepreneurial skills argue that in a complex society with high population density and a diversity of needs and interests, it is important for a farmer to develop entrepreneurial skills. Cope (2005) is approaching entrepreneurial learning with learning tasks in five different categories. One of them is 'Learning about the environment and entrepreneurial networks'. With the portal we aim to develop learning tasks in this category. For instance, managing relationships with existing and potential customers, or appreciating and maximising the relationship with stakeholders around the farm. Therefore one assumption while developing the portal was to focus on the skills that can be trained.

Portal community oriented entrepreneurship

The portal community oriented entrepreneurship is developed in assignment of the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs and Agriculture. Development started in 2010 and the portal was published on internet late 2011. The portal can be found on the following web address: www.omgevingsgerichtondernemen.nl and is only available in Dutch. In this part of the paper we elaborate on what the delineation is of community oriented entrepreneurship, the goal of the portal, how the portal is designed, for which target groups and how the portal is tested during development.

What is community oriented **entrepreneurship**

When developing the portal, we defined 'community oriented entrepreneurship' as entrepreneurship that focuses on the integration of needs of the social and physical environment in the business strategy. For example by involving the neighbours in the expansion of the farm with a new stable; Or by allowing citizens to experience rural landscape on a footpath on the farm's property. Community oriented entrepreneurship opens up new opportunities and avoids obstacles hindering the (future) development of the farm.

Community oriented entrepreneurship is not only about the social and physical environment, but about the incorporation of these into the business strategy of a farmer. Where for example cost price reduction or highest added value are opposite strategies a farmer can choose from, community orientation can be valuable for both of these strategies.

Purpose of the portal

The portal contains tools, experiences and information to stimulate farmers to develop awareness of and involvement with their societal environment. In other words it aims to support the development of entrepreneurial skills which connect networks of various types of stakeholders and resources around a farm to the business strategy of a farmer. These skills can be trained by using content selected for the portal.

Content for this portal was expected to be found in examples of, and studies about, multifunctional farmers. These farmers are connecting more directly to their clients and therefore often have good entrepreneurial skills. However, the portal should not only contain examples from the multifunctional agriculture sector, since the target group consists of different farmers, with different strategies (e.g. world market orientation, local production, organic, diversity or specialisation). The portal has to display examples and information from all kinds of sectors within, or even outside, agriculture to inspire such a broad target group.

A portal is a place where relevant information for a certain group on a certain theme is gathered. In our case it is a place where existing knowledge is available to certain groups of farmers with the goal to have impact on their acting as a farmer. The purpose of the portal is to make developed knowledge and tools more accessible for the farmer.

Designing the portal

During the development of the portal a prototyping approach was used. On several occasions a prototype of the concept of the portal was presented to a group of stakeholders from education,

farmers-organisations and government). Feedback from these sessions were taken into account and adjustments were made to the concept and design.

The concept of community oriented entrepreneurship was explored, which resulted in the visualisation in figure 1. We describe three levels in the concept: the farmer, the farm and the social and physical environment. The content of the portal should operate on all these three levels in order to be effective in developing community oriented entrepreneurial skills.
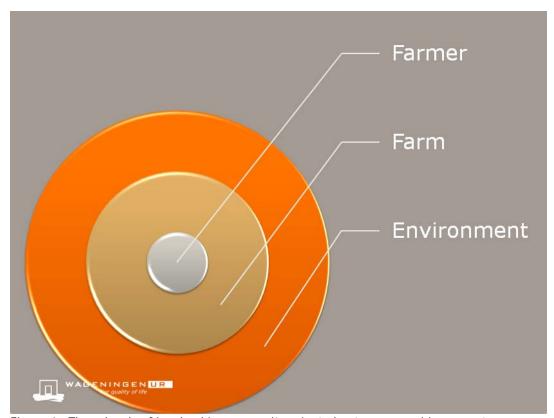

Figure 1: *Three levels of involved in community oriented entrepreneurship concept*

Within the design process we defined the target groups the portal should aim at. As the end user we defined farmers. The portal, as available now, can be used directly by farmers. We choose however to focus on intermediaries (advisors, teachers) as the main target group of the portal, since they play an important role in helping farmers to develop their entrepreneurial skills.

In a study of de Wolf et. al. (2007) it is argued that there is a direct relationship between entrepreneurial success and education level. It also suggests that younger farmers are more able to develop entrepreneurial skills than older farmers. Reaching future farmers in their educational programme is very effective for training entrepreneurial skills. Therefore, teachers from

agricultural education were involved in all the feedback moments of the concept and portal development.

The main reason for choosing intermediaries as the most important target groups is that we assume entrepreneurial skills will develop more when someone not directly involved in the farm gives feedback on the business and learning process of a farmer. For a farmer this is usually done in a meeting with an advisor on his farm, or via a meeting with other farmers. In a farmers' network the facilitator of the group and the farmers will give feedback to each other.

For the content collection we did some expert interviews and searched some archives of research programmes. This led to a long list of possible content for the portal. During the development of the portal the list was extended with new content options that reached us via all sorts of news items. Conditions for the selection of content were that the content should be attractive for both multifunctional and conventional farmers, and that content was both publicly available and aimed at developing entrepreneurial skills associated with the social and physical environment. A number of contents had to be rewritten to make them more suitable for our target groups. This often meant turning a report into a short presentation of the content and a description of how to use it, combined with a worksheet that can be printed and used by farmers directly. The portal contains, at this moment, fifty different contents. A protocol is followed to ensure that the content is working correctly and is kept up to date. For example the links in the content will be checked four times a year.

The portal has three levels; home page, theme page and content page (figure 2). In every level the user of the portal can choose from several options. On the home page the content is divided over six themes. After the first feedback session with the prototype of the portal we adjusted the titles and content of several themes. However, we kept the number of six themes to make a simple design possible in displaying two sets of three themes. The definitive themes are: neighbours, market, landscape & nature, permits, multifunctional activities and climate & energy. Next to the thematic route we made a free text search available with the option to search for specific content types. Figure 3 gives a screenshot of the homepage.
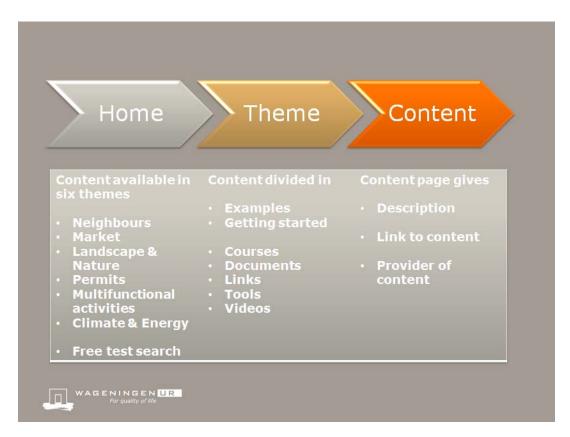
Figure 2: *Levels of the portal and options/information on each level*

Figure 3: *Screenshot of homepage - level 1*

In the thematic content page the content is divided into two types of categories - examples and getting started. Content labelled as 'example' gives insight in how other entrepreneurs incorporate community oriented entrepreneurship into their business strategy. 'Getting started' content is characterised by tools that farmers can actively apply to their own farm. We also made a subdivision on type of content within the thematic content page. The content types are courses, documents, links, tools and videos. Both content categories and type can be selected on this level. If examples and videos are selected, the user will only see content that is labelled in this way (figure 4).

Figure 4: *Screenshot of theme page - level 2*

The last level of the portal, the content page, gives a description of the actual content and how to use it, one or more links towards the content and information about the supplier of the content. Video content is embedded within the portal. For other types of content the user is led to other websites or download locations. Figure 5 gives a screenshot of a video content page.

Figure 5: *Screenshot of content page - level 3*

An important feedback moment in the development of the portal was a test session of the prototype with 16 people representing intermediaries, our main target group, and farmers. For this prototype test we filled two themes with contents. A major feedback point was user-friendliness of the portal and the content on the portal. In the prototype we labelled the contents into three categories that were levelled according to expected steps in skill development. First is self-reflection, second to get inspired by others and the third is to begin implementing aspects in their own business strategy. However, the group did not find the distinction useful between these three levels when testing the prototype. The argument was that when a farmer makes use of content and tools to reflect on his/her own skills it is simultaneously part of getting started to implement aspects in the business strategy. Another important feedback issue was the presentation of information. More content should produce ready to use results for the farmer.

Links to books and background information were hardly used. In the final portal we added as much as possible content that fulfilled this requirement. Tools were added that could be filled out on the internet and which give a direct result, or reports were split up into smaller parts that are easier to digest. Also, the possibility of using worksheets was an important criterion.

After the publication of the portal we tested it with a group of ten advisors specialised in building and environmental permits for farmers. In this group there was a general recognition for the need for an open mind and pro-active involvement with the social and physical environment of the agricultural entrepreneur. However, this user group was reluctant towards using this portal in their work for two reasons: 1) They lack the time to discuss the content with the farmer. The farmer is paying them for every hour they are working on obtaining the permit and therefore they ask the advisor to work as efficient as possible. The clients of these advisors already have a rather definitive view on where they want a permit for; 2) Some of the content of the portal is competition for the services the advisors offer to farmers.

Discussion

Development of entrepreneurial skills and dealing with competing claims on rural area are important for obtaining a license to operate for the entrepreneur who wishes to obtain as much freedom for the development of his farm as possible. The portal community oriented entrepreneurship offers tools and information to entrepreneurs to develop those skills. However, the need to develop these skills is mostly voiced by policy makers and researchers, not by farmers themselves. For most farmers and intermediaries the topic of community oriented entrepreneurship is a new phenomenon. When discussing about the issue most of them acknowledge that the issue is important for the development of the farm. But their sense of urgency is not very high. Most of them also express that they find it regrettable that these kinds of skills are necessary for the farmer. This admittance can reflect the acknowledgment that society and agriculture grew apart from each other, so that a farmer cannot cope anymore with the basic requirements of professional skills and management skills.

Feedback on the prototype simplified the portal from a conceptual point of view. It is important that the design of the portal is very easy to understand and the content is ready to use for our target groups. Is this 'design for dummies' a loss of quality or is it connecting to the learning style of farmers? Most farmers develop skills via the manner of 'learn by doing' or active

learning. The portal and its content is meant to be the enabling agent to develop entrepreneurial skills. These types of strategic tools are, however, not used on a daily basis by the farmer, like for instance a feed computer would be. That limits the rate of competency development. Therefore, it is important for the portal to connect practically to the needs of farmers in combining community needs with their own business strategy, in order to achieve a change in farming entrepreneurship.

So far, the content on the portal is supply driven, even though different stakeholders from the industry and education were involved in the development. Tools and information from previous research projects are supplied to farmers. In order to truly address the needs of farmers that want to develop on community orientation, constant feedback is needed from user groups to decide what content is offered. Thus the portal aims to provide users with up-to-date information and practical and useful tools. Demand-driven actualisation could be operationalized for instance by analysing user statistics of the different tools offered, a 'like button' to go with each content item, or regular feedback sessions with intermediaries using the tools on the portal with farmers.

To facilitate the constant adjustment of the supplied content to the needs of the users it would be valuable to transfer ownership of the portal over to farmers-organisations or teachers association. In this way the community of advisors or teachers can develop the content to their needs and promote usage of the portal amongst its members.

Further development

In 2012 new test sessions are planned, ideally by request of intermediaries and/or farmers. There is also the possibility to organise a session in which the portal is tested is communicated via several news items. Next to these sessions we will test the portal with advisors focussing of farm business strategy and network supervisors of groups of farmers. We expect that they require information and tools we are offering on the portal.

Another line of broadening the impact of the portal is through agricultural education. The portal is already used in some courses. Lecturers are discussing if the portal can be used as the basis for a new course in their educational program. In 2012 test sessions with lecturers and students will be organised. This strategy aims at the adoption of the portal community oriented entrepreneurship by intermediary stakeholders, to be used in the development of the entrepreneurial skills of farmers.

Acknowledgements

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