

# **AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE UPTAKE AND BENEFIT OF VIRTUAL LEARNING NETWORK OPPORTUNITIES IN THE SMALL BUSINESS TOURISM SECTOR**

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## **Abstract**

While there is a growing interest in learning networks, relatively little research has been published with a specific tourism focus. Thus, this paper is concerned with tourism learning networks (TLN) and the role of virtual learning environments (VLE) in sustaining member viability following facilitated TLN interaction. The authors investigate user adoption and uptake of Fáilte Ireland<sup>2</sup>'s VLE, commencing with a comprehensive literature review, relating to virtual learning network (VLN) environments, and resulting in a VLN framework for a small firm environment.

A mixed method approach enabled the authors to comprehensively uncover quantitative measurements with qualitative insights through the use of key informant interviews, census questionnaire, click stream data analysis and semi-structured interviews. Findings classified the nature of the network in both physical and virtual capacities, through the identification of modes of communication, level of membership, intentions to seek advice, make contact and contribute within the networking community. In terms of VLN usage, time was identified as the lead barrier to using the VLE, followed by a lack of training, and a low usage level among TLN members. Furthermore, findings suggest that while participants are willing to seek advice and share information, most felt they made only limited contributions to the VLN community.

From a theoretical perspective, this research offers a framework for VLN facilitation in the tourism sector, and indicates the necessary dimensions involved in promotion of interactive learning online. The study also provides an in-depth analysis of participants' perspectives in relation to virtual collaboration (activity, barriers, and adoption levels), participants' perspectives in relation to the TLN support structure, and any underlying behavioral mediators, that may be responsible for poor VLN activity.

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## **1.0 Introduction**

Much of tourism development is predicated on the successful working of organizations' and their competitive alignment in the form of partnerships or networks. Specifically, national and international research studies acknowledge the importance of small firm network-centered learning (Morrison et al., 2004; Taylor and Thorpe, 2004; Gibb, 1997), where an integral part of this learning process is the complete network of relationships of the small firm owner-manager. This paper focuses on virtual learning networks (VLN) among small tourism businesses, and presents a conceptual frame within which VLNs can be studied from a small firm perspective.

## **1.1 Literature Review**

Networks can be described as a form of collaborative relationship that firms enter into with their competitors in order to gain strategic advantages (Love and Thomas, 2004). From a small firm perspective, the network amounts to a set of co-ordinated actors, whose connections are based on social exchange and collaborative relationship ties, and show varying degrees of formality across network typologies (Weber and Khademian 2008; O' Donnell et al., 2001). The concept of a learning network falls within this frame, and is described as '*a network formally set up for the primary purpose of increasing knowledge*' (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001:88).

From a review of network literature it has been acknowledged that inter-firm network activity can produce learning outcomes (Morris et al., 2006; Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001), which may occur as a result of individuals interacting in shared spaces (Lave and Wagner, 1991), or through cooperative or collaborative group activities and learning in communities of practice (Allan and Lewis, 2006). Furthermore, social capital within a network includes the types of norms, trusts, and shared understanding as the social glue that holds people together (Daniel et al., 2003). Thus, viewing a network structure from a social perspective brings focus to the relationships that may exist among and between network players (Chell and Baines, 2001). The authors' contend that this approach offers greater insight into network activity among small firm actors, particularly in the virtual environment. Specifically, sociability, usability, interactivity and dimensions of knowledge construction and social capital are key criteria in the small firm VLN environment, as they offer a means for the construction of knowledge between participants resulting in learning. VLNs can enhance interactivity among networking participants, allowing effective communication of valid purposeful agendas. Social capital can be built and maintained in these environments if the correct social contexts

are provided as a result of relational and structural dimensions. Consideration of these aspects and an adequate understanding of social network contexts assisted the authors in proposing an initial framework for VLN activity in a small firm context (See Appendix A- Framework One).

## **1.2 Methodology**

The authors applied a phased sequential methodology, with each preceding phase informing the consequent phases, consistent with Creswell's (2003) sequential mixed method design. The researchers initially carried out unstructured/semi-structured interviews in order to establish the small firm network' purpose and focus; and then, as influenced by the literature review and initial framework design, carried out a census on the entire population (269 participants: overall 47 % response). The survey was then followed by a series of semi-structured interviews to flesh out user behaviour and usage criteria in context. The adoption of a mixed method approach (Creswell, 2003) in this study enabled the analysis of learning networks to include adequate recognition of structural and relational aspects of the network (Allan and Lewis, 2006).

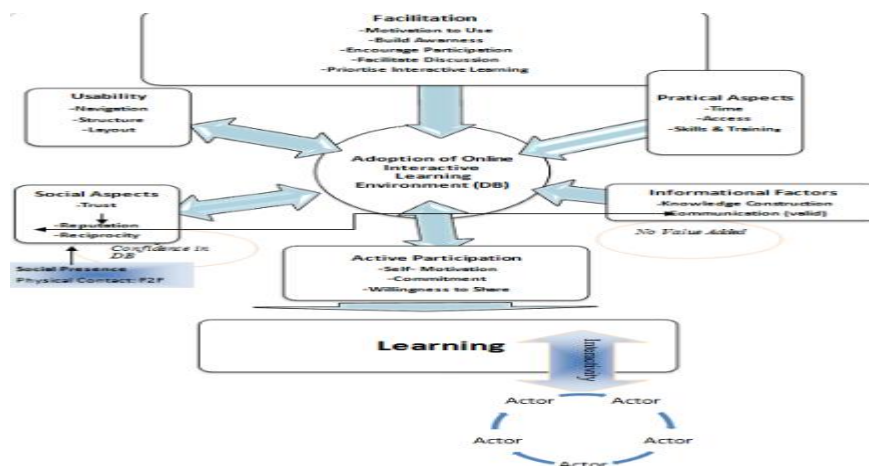
## **1.3 Findings**

This research has established the level of value participants attribute to various facilities and the level of support offered to them from support agencies. Results have also indicated some interesting findings in relation to barriers to the Discussion Board facility, while also detecting participants' level of contribution to the networking community. The findings suggest that very little virtual interaction is occurring among network participants (0.02%), supporting the view that without adequate levels of interaction among participants, learning does not occur (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Bessant and Francis, 1999; Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001). This research also indicates that there were poor levels of active contribution by individual participants, with associated weak relationship ties to the community. This form of participation can only be sustainable for a diminutive time (Romiszowski and Mason, 2004) and while members who sit on the periphery can still learn, if more members observe than participate it can be detrimental for the overall survival of the network/community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Finally, time was cited as a key barrier to the adoption and usage of online interactive facilities especially among the network population (61.8%), reinforcing the findings of Guan et al. (2008) in the literature review. Two other prevalent attitudinal barriers were '*lack of motivation to use*' and '*lack of priority towards its use*'.

### 1.4 Refining the conceptual framework for fostering VLN activity

Framework Two has incorporated all the dimensions of Framework One including social and informational aspects to network collaboration. Additional variables have been incorporated into this framework as a result of primary research which includes facilitation, usability and practical aspects. In addition the framework outlines inhibitors to discussion board (DB) adoption from both social and informational perspectives (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Small firm virtual learning network framework



As evident in Framework Two, online interaction is constrained socially due to a *lack of confidence* in the DB as an interactive communication mechanism. It also identifies the positive impact face-to-face contact has on building and maintaining social relationships in an online forum. In context social interaction can be facilitated and fostered through offline interaction.

From an informational context, the *lack of added value* is perceived as a direct inhibitor to knowledge creation and effective communication among actors. The relationship between social and informational aspects is also portrayed, and this link represents how the construction of knowledge is dependent on the social relationships among actors. It also represents how the construction of valid, useful and purposeful information can impact on levels of participation and engagement, thus impacting on social interactive capabilities of the VLN forum. All facets outlined in the Framework Two ultimately contribute to

active participation among social networking actors within a virtual context. Facilitation plays a key role in encouraging, supporting and enabling virtual interaction among social actors and is ultimately responsible for all other aspects involved in enhancing online interaction. Based on the current research, VLN learners need to be self-motivated, committed and willing to participate in active learning among others. A further requirement of virtual learning is that learners need to be stimulated to participate in order to remain highly engaged in the learning process (Daniel et al., 2003), although the studied DB did not stimulate these criteria, due to insufficient levels of collaborative activity within the VLN. Notably, issues associated with 'time' need to be overcome for these criteria to be successfully released.

### **1.5 Conclusion and Recommendations**

The proposed Framework offers a means for facilitation of small firm owner-manager learning in virtual environments by indicating the necessary dimensions involved in promotion of interactive learning online. It builds on previous literature on community/network learning and encompasses the unique characteristics of a small firm tourism enterprise. While this study is unique to this learning network, it offers a basis for future research into the area of practitioner-based virtual learning. Finally, this study has further endorsed the concept of a 'learning community' from a virtual perspective, thus adding to literature in the area which had mainly been studied from, a *pedagogical* orientation. From a practical standpoint, enhancing levels of interactivity among owner managers enhances management capabilities and is the key to regional sustainability.

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**Appendix A: Framework One; Proposed Small Firm VLN framework**

