Extension Suite Online™

Development Team

When dealing with the development of large software projects like Extension Suite Online, a development team needs to consist of specialist members with a wide range of skills.

Jeanne-Louise du Plessis, a visual communications expert responsible for design elements, is assisted by Lizette van Zyl, a skilled graphics artist who develops rich user interfaces. Dealing with software programming, Sabelo Gumede is responsible for the GIS and statistics modules, Francois van der Merwe for core services and module development, Kabelo Malatetja, a specialist web developer, for module development and Tlaleng Mohlahlo, a computer scientist, for data management and web programming. The team is assisted and organised by Vincent Victor, who has extensive experience in the development and management of large software packages.

Article: Vincent Victor

QUESTION OF THE MONTH

"Do you think urban farming can become a reality as a sustainable food source within the near future? "

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The Importance of an ESO Mobile System

The pace of mobile telephone development in Africa has been extreme to the extent where during the past decade the mobile phone users already outnumber fixed telephone lines by more than four to one in many markets.

Although the UN Development Programme say that one in every two people in sub-Saharan Africa lives on less than US$1 a day, the boom in the mobile market has been driven largely by demand from these low-income and rural areas.

From a user perspective, mobiles have enabled consumers to conduct both business and social life more efficiently, whilst making a range of new products and services available for the first time. From a provider perspective, both operators and handset manufacturers have largely targeted lower-income users:

It should be noted that major handset manufacturers have developed and introduced ultra low-cost products specifically for the African market, priced at between US$25 and US$45 each. Although this still represents a sizable chunk of most households' disposable income, studies have found that handsets are often shared within communities to spread the burden of the initial capital outlay;

Many network operators have lowered tariffs and offered promotions to attract new users. Some have introduced 'borderless' networks to allow free roaming between states, designed specifically for rural communities who can often straddle two countries whose borders are not continuously marked.

According to a 2005 report by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), African mobile phone users prefer pre-paid top-up cards to post-paid subscription services. Pre-paid top-up does not require a fixed postal address, incurs low start-up costs for the end-user and exposes operators and resellers to minimal credit risk. Approximately 87% of African mobile phone customers were pre-paid users.

So, it is therefore obvious that in terms of Africa, its mobile users and access to such services, Extension Suite Online should be enabled to be accessed by such inexpensive mobile services. Since mobile devices are outgrowing other devices such as notebooks it is of even greater importance that we also make ESO available on the humble cell phone.

Usually your regular web application is too overwhelming for a mobile phone. A mobile application is a different game entirely with its much smaller screen and slow download speeds. It requires an entirely different approach for mobile sites than would a normal web site.

It is therefore also important to understand that a regular web application needs to be compatible with only a few browsers whilst a mobile system needs to be compatible with a rather large number of phone types which requires special skills, a new look at the type of data as well as data formats and lots of testing before it can be released.

Article: Dr Roelof de Villiers

Risk Management in Agriculture

There are a variety of tools and sections available within Extension Suite Online to help farmers manage financial risk.

Risk is an important aspect of the farming sector and the causes of risk in agriculture are numerous and diverse. These risks are introduced through a variety of factors, ranging from climate variability and change, frequent natural disasters, uncertainties in yields and prices, weak rural infrastructure, imperfect markets and a lack of financial support services. These factors not only endanger the farmer's livelihood and incomes but also undermine the viability of the agriculture sector and its potential to become a part of the solution to the problem of widespread poverty of the farmers and agricultural labour.

Farmers make decisions in risky, ever changing environments, and the consequences of their decisions are generally only known when it is too late and the outcome had become irreversible. Farmers and other business people generally prefer not to get into risky situations unless there is a high probability of profit. Higher profits are typically associated with higher risks.

Given the changing structure of the agricultural industry, managing risk has become vitally important to the success of agricultural operations. Risk normally culminates in financial risk. Financial risk increases because of the need to finance business operations and maintain cash flow levels adequate in order to repay debts and meet other financial obligations. The ability to secure necessary loans is vital to many farm operations, but borrowing money introduces numerous risks.

The key to a farmer reducing financial risk is to know his financial situation. By having good farm records, a farmer can evaluate where he has been, where he is now, and whether or not he is moving in the right direction. Good financial records allow a farmer to better understand his financial risks and in which areas he needs to improve his financial situation.

There are a variety of tools and sections available within Extension Suite Online to help farmers manage financial risk. Extensionists can assist the farmers that they serve by making use of the ESO Gross Margin Budgets to develop a comprehensive budget regarding harvest, pre-harvest, labour and marketing costs. Other tools within the Economics section include Market Prices, Business Models and Marketing. These sections have specifically been developed to aid extensionists in assisting the farmers with financial decision making, financial record keeping and planning.

Article: Suzan Bendo

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Roll-out of ESO beyond South Africa

As reported during 2009, Manstrat has embarked upon a process of investigating the demand for, and application of, ESO as an Agricultural Decision Support system within the wider SADC region and Africa generally.

Following the positive feedback received from various parties, work commenced towards adjusting the South African system to the needs, requirements, environmental conditions and circumstances of the larger region. In this regard very good progress has been made in adding a number of new agricultural commodities that are popular in other African countries (e.g. cassava, plantain, yam, tobacco, rice, sisal, millets, pyrethrum, etc.).

In accordance with the needs of resource poor farmers, the African version also places a stronger focus on low input cultivation practices, low cost pest and disease control practices, small scale processing and storage practices and technology, etc.

Article: Jantus van der Linden

TECHNOLOGY TIPS *by Francois van der Merwe*

Usernames and Passwords

When a new profile is created for a user, the user is assigned a username which is usually the email address of that specific user. The user is sent a temporary password to effect the first login. Upon first login the user is required to type in a new password for his newly created account.

The function and purpose of the username and password is to provide security for the system, and for the user. Security is very import when it comes to information providing services, in order to protect the data and protect the sensitive details of each and every user.

Never give your username and password to other people. We at Manstrat will never ask for your username and password. Keep your password save, and help us maintain system integrity!

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