Extension Suite Online™

This issue

To receive the Extension Suite Online newsletter via email, register your details on:

www.newsletter.esuite.co.za

Data capturing team

One of the responsibilities of the Manstrat Information Centre (MIC), and a major project of the Centre, is the capturing of agricultural data for the Manstrat agricultural database.

Personnel of the MIC are required to wear many hats and multi-tasking is their *forté*. The latest addition to their job descriptions will see many of those already playing important roles in the MIC, rolling up their sleeves to get involved in the more technical aspects of data capturing.

ESO has enabled Manstrat to gain recognition as the foremost agricultural problem solving and ICT providing consultancy firm in southern Africa. The focus now is elevating the Knowledge Centre and agricultural knowledge base to the same level.

Data capturing and storing is executed by Portia Maibelo, Suzan Bendo, Vic Victor, Xolile Dlhamini, Londiwe Thabethe, Mmabatho Pula, Zodidi Sivetshe, Mohlabane Mphahlele, Julia Staitai, Thapedi Fetshedi and Piet van Zyl.

Article: Piet van Zyl

QUESTION OF THE MONTH

"Do you think organic farming can effectively minimize the carbon footprint produced through agricultural activities?"

Extension Suite Online:
Support to institutions of higher learning

Extension Suite Online has originally been developed as an internet based Decision Support System for Agricultural Extensionists in Africa. It has been implemented by the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries on a national basis in South Africa and as a result, Agricultural Colleges and Universities have expressed interest to include ESO as part of its Agricultural Extension curricula country wide. To this end, a Student Version of ESO has been developed and the modalities of implementation are currently being developed between Manstrat and institutions of Higher Learning.

However, apart from its use in extension and advisory services, Extension Suite Online has also become a major source of information to its users, especially in the research field. This has let to a recent discovery that the system is increasingly being used as a reference work by students in various fields of agriculture.

It came as no surprise, since the information and knowledge captured in ESO is of a high standard, are referenced and scientifically verified, an effort that has resulted in a high level of trust of information. The system as it exists in its current version can therefore be used as an online handbook that has a number of unique and interesting characteristics:

- The information provided to users is of a high standard and are verified by experts in each field of agriculture, to ensure correctness as well as appropriateness for a specific region.
- The information is updated regularly and the ESO reference work therefore grows over time, becoming more comprehensive every day.
- It brings learners closer together, creating a community if students. It is envisaged that using ESO as a learning reference may even bring students of various universities together, allowing the weaker institutions to benefit and be strengthened by the stronger institutions. Moreover, it will certainly allow for the sharing of information and knowledge between such institutions, improving the standard of learning across the board.
- The reference work is free, articles and portions are printable and many tips, guides and tools exists on most topics, making subjects easy to understand and presenting information at an understandable level.

The student Version of ESO therefore not only introduces students in agricultural extension to ICT and Decision Support Systems, but it has also become the place where students gather to learn about agriculture.

Article: Dr Roelof de Villiers

User experience in ESO

User experience is defined by the International Organization for Standardization as "a person's perceptions and responses that result from the use or anticipated use of a product, system or service",

User experience can often indicate the success of a particular product. It may also in many instances cause the failure of a product by not achieving its goals, when users lose interest or become frustrated. It is therefore necessary to take a user-centred design approach when developing and adapting a product.

User experience is defined by the International Organization for Standardization as "a person's perceptions and responses that result from the use or anticipated use of a product, system or service", which is subjective and emotional by nature.

To quantify user experience in Extension Suite Online objectively, factors that influence user experience, including branding, usability, functionality and content, are analysed not only as a collective indication of user experience, but also as separate influences on user experience. This is very important because one element of a product could influence user experience badly, even though the overall impression is very good (e.g. a well designed product where data is irrelevant). Content, which includes the actual information as well as the structure of content, is evaluated to make sure that information is up to date, relevant, clear and easy to navigate. The ease of which application components and features can be used indicates user experience in terms of usability. Technical processes that deliver information to the user is functionally analysed to determine timely responses to information requests. In terms of branding, consistent visual impact of graphics and layout elements (look-and-feel) is evaluated to ensure an engaging and memorable experience to the user.

Methods used to gather information for analysis includes utilisation trends, user interviews and feedback from actual users. This is used to constantly analyse, evaluate and optimise Extension Suite Online to make sure that users are able to utilise content effectively to support them in making informed decisions in extension services.
Article: Vincent Victor

Potential Role and Contribution of ESO in sub-Saharan Africa

As the United Nations prepares for its September summit on the Millennium Development Goals, a survey by Gallup in 18 sub-Saharan Africa countries found that residents spontaneously nominated agriculture (20%) and jobs (19%) as the most important issues their governments should address over the next 12 months.

Further research undertaken by ActionAid for the World Bank in countries such as Malawi, Kenya and Uganda revealed that investment in **woman smallholder farmers** is the key to halving hunger in Africa and results in twice as much growth as investment in any other sector (even though they are currently discriminated against and receive less than one per cent of the total agricultural budgets). The above research confirms the urgent need for expanding and rolling out Extension Suite Online (ESO) into the other African regions and countries. It further highlights the importance of targeting female farmers and ensuring their access to ESO.
Article: Jantus van der Linden

TECHNOLOGY TIPS *by Francois van der Merwe*

Browser Compatibility

A browser is the application that you run on your computer which enables you to see content on the internet, hence the term "browsing". There are many types of browsers today, of which Internet Explorer, Fire Fox and Chrome are the most popular. When developing a new website or web application, it is important to make sure that your website is compatible with a variety of browsers. It is nearly impossible to develop for all types of browser on the internet today.

Extension Suite Online was designed to work on Internet Explorer, Fire Fox and Chrome, although those browsers were our primary target, al lot of other browser will still be able to utilize ESO. If you find that you are unable to open Extension Suite Online, try switching to a newer version of you current browser or even try a completely different one.

Manstrat