

Title of the paper

Building advisory relationships with farmers to foster innovation

Theme of the conference for which the proposal is intended

2. New Skills and Capabilities for Extension to achieve Innovation Policies Objective

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Introduction

Increasing attention is being given to evaluating the impact of advisory services in terms of their effectiveness in providing farmers with knowledge and networks for innovation as well as understanding the factors that influence this effectiveness (Prager et al, 2017). The demand and uptake of advisory services is one factor and Klerkx et al (2017) comment on the variation in farmers' demand and the influences of variables such as farm size, asset status and education as well as stability or turbulence in the regulatory environment. Some research has started to look at the quality of the service provided by advisors and debates in the literature have paid some attention to the new skills and profiles to be developed by agricultural advisors (Faure et al, 2012) including the importance of credibility and relational trust in the advisor - farmer relationship (Sutherland et al, 2013). Despite general agreement on the importance of social expertise, there are still wide differences in the conceptual understanding of the advisory relationship and how trust and confidence work to provide opportunities for information acquisition and knowledge exchange. Ingram (2008) has shown that farmers can be proactive or reactive in their relationship with advisors and how this relationship may be steered by either party or be more equal. The relationship between advisors and the farmers with whom they work is often one of the most influential in the transfer of knowledge and learning (Kuehne *et al.*, 2015) yet it remains something of an enigma, often more art than science. Despite the diversity in public and private advisory service providers, there is increasing attention being given to the professional formation and continuing professional development of extension professionals (Gorman, 2018). The ProAKIS project called for the introduction and development of certification and accreditation schemes which could establish or strengthen the profession of agricultural advisor with curricula that include methodological emphasis as well as technical know-how. CECRA (European Certificate for Consultants in Rural Areas) is an example of an accreditation scheme for advisors that is focusing on such communication and methodological competencies.

This paper is based on qualitative research conducted in Ireland with farmer clients of the public agricultural advisory service (Teagasc) and with a small sample of advisors. The objective of the research was to identify the critical factors that positively and negatively affect agricultural

advisor-client relationships at different stages, the consequent adoption of farm innovations and to identify approaches and principles that can be used to strengthen advisor-client relationships.

Literature review

Across the EU, there is significant diversity in the forms and structures of the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) with varying forms of privatised and publicly funded services. For smaller scale farmers, a lot of the emphasis for farm advisory services has been on ensuring cross compliance with environmental and other legislation with concerns that the knowledge transfer priority has focused on the managerial knowledge to manage grants and legislation rather than on technology and innovation (Sutherland et al, 2017). Labarthe et al (2018) conceptualise farmer decision making as cyclical and staged with major decisions often made as responses to trigger events and influenced dynamically by advisory services, peers, researchers and other sources of knowledge in what they consider to be the farmer's microAKIS. Family based factors such as attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control, as well as resource availability, motivations and incentives also play a strong role in farmer decision making (Manning *et al.*, 2013).

Kuehne and Llewellyn, (2017) examine the knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange process between farmers and advisors in terms of know what, know how, know why and know who in order to understand the 'wisdom' value that the advisor brings to the farmer. Carlock (2016) suggests that there are four different types of professional advisors who serve family businesses namely: teachers/trainers who transfer general knowledge and information which the family business must then interpret in order to apply to their business; the consultant who offers expert bespoke advice tailored to the client's business; coaches who support new interpersonal and work skills in order for the individual to lead and manage innovation adoption and business change; and finally therapists who work on identifying current approaches and habits and ways in which to facilitate the adoption of new behaviour and further insight into how the approach of the person influences efficiency and profitability. Andersen (2004) has also considered different approaches of agricultural advisors from the specialist, to the reflective specialist and the reflective listener which resonate with the three approaches considered by Roling and Groot (1998) namely: technology transfer, advice and learning facilitation.

Jansen (2010) developed a typology of farmers based on the type of relationship they have with advisors where the 'pro-activist' is the one actively and openly seeking advice, making explicit requests for advice when investing or considering new technologies. For most advisers this is the 'ideal' client although some advisers may find it difficult to live up to the expectations. Jansen describes another type of farmer as the 'do-it-yourselfer' who seldom has a strong relationship with the advisory service and may question or challenge the official advice. She posits that advisors often have mixed views about this group who challenge and ask critical questions. Some more confident advisors can build a constructive relationship and learn from and with this client. Another type Jansen identifies is the 'wait-and-see-er' who will often participate in activities but is slow to implement new knowledge. These farmers rarely challenge the advisor but the advisor needs specific skills to be able to challenge them in a way that encourages improvement in farm management. They are not so explicit in articulating their needs. The last type Jansen identifies is the 'reclusive traditionalist' who rarely makes contact with advisory services and by acting in that way, makes it challenging for the advisory service to deliver on its public good mandate.

Hansen et al (2018) examine how agronomist-farmer knowledge-exchange encounters can be characterized by an imbalance of power, distrust, and the divergence of knowledge, while other encounters provide a platform for the facilitation of farmer learning. They emphasise the importance of professional and relational competence if the farmer is not to be a passive consumer and if both the advisor and farmers participate in the definition of the problem faced by the farmers and the construction of solutions to address the problem. They highlight the importance of the advisor being able to challenge the farmer if new insights are to be gained on a problem. They also found that farmers and advisors sometimes have quite different opinions about the outcome of the visits and that if the advisor uses the same approach regardless of the farmers' expectations and the farming context, some farmers end up dissatisfied. Similarly, Höckert and Ljung (2013) highlight that it is at the individual level, both for advisors and farmers that the challenge is to create the relational space for human encounters where good ideas can be formulated and implemented. They posit that advisors must question their

traditional role as experts and begin to engage in discussions in which both their own and the farmers' 'weltanschauung' or worldview are questioned.

Advisor-client relationships are dynamic and go through a number of stages which have been characterised by Ford *et al* (2003) and Bagdonie and Jakstaite (2009) as; pre-relationship, exploratory, developing and stable. Each stage of relationship development differs by different dimensions of trust (Fisher, 2013). Curry (2010) discusses three different types of trust in rural civic participation as personal trust, system trust and instrumental trust and that each type requires both a justification and a leap of faith. In the pre-relationship stage, organisational reputation is important while in the exploratory stage the process of questioning and listening are central so that dialogue and mutual understanding can begin and goals or objectives be developed. This initial stage sets the ground for working together. As the advisor works on an action plan with the client, the relationship deepens and the quality will be influenced by the technical knowledge and access to information that the advisor can provide. It is important that the action plans provide rich opportunities for learning and reflection so that performance can be reviewed and the client is willing to continue to work on other issues with the advisor.

Methodology

A qualitative case study approach was taken to create an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of complex issues within the advisory relationship. Following key informant interviews with regional managers from Teagasc, four farm advisors from central Ireland were purposively selected to include; different enterprises, different ages and advisors with different term relationships with their clients. Twenty eight farmer clients were then purposively identified from client lists provided by the selected farm advisors to include representation from different enterprises, different ages and clients with different contract types within Teagasc. Purposeful sampling is useful to identify and select information rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2011). Additionally, Bernard (2002) indicate that it provides for selecting individuals who are available, willing to participate and have ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive and reflective manner.

Boyce and Neale (2006) and DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) emphasise the value of in-depth interviews for exploring experiences, thoughts and behaviours of individuals.

Face to face in-depth interviews were conducted with each of the farmer clients on the interviewee's farm. Each interview lasted an average of forty five minutes. The focus of the interview was on how the relationship with their advisor had developed over time and the qualities they valued (or not) in their advisory relationship. Face to face interviews were also conducted with the four farm advisors to get their perspective on how they believe effective agricultural advisor-client relationships can be established and maintained. The interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and then analysed using the 'descriptive coding' method (Saldaña, 2014). This involved summarising the piece of text being examined and coding the key points using NVivo 10.

Findings

Table 1 below shows the profile of the interviewees in terms of age, gender, farm type and the duration of their advisory relationship. The low number of female interviewees reflects the findings of Molloy et al (2016) about the low level of female Teagasc clients and the low level of advisory engagement with farm women.

Table 1: Distribution of Interviewees by Age, Gender, Farm Type, and Duration of Advisory Relationship

Farmer – Client (n=28)	Number	%
Age		
< 40 Years	17	60
> 40 Years	11	40
Gender		
Male	26	93
Female	2	7
Location		
Laois	10	36
Kildare	12	43
Meath	6	21
Farming Enterprise		
Dairy	13	46
Drystock (cattle and sheep)	15	54
Length of Relationship with Advisor		

< 3 Years	12	43
> 3 Years	16	57

The early stages of the advisory relationship

For most of the respondents, a primary reason for becoming a client of the advisory service was to get support and expertise for EU and national agricultural schemes and to ensure compliance with the required paperwork. The most important of these is the annual application process for the Basic Payment Scheme and respondents felt that they would not have to worry if Teagasc was their interlocutor with government. The second most important reason for becoming a client was access to independent technical information and advice and again here the reputation of the organisation was considered critical with typical comments such as *“Teagasc provide a wide range of advice, they’re efficient and up to date with information, they know what’s going on in the agricultural sector and they’re very approachable”*. This was contrasted with commercial representatives from agri-companies where farmers felt that such advice might not be independent although some respondents spoke very positively about relationships with advisors from their cooperative.

Some of the respondents had followed their parents in having an advisory contract with Teagasc, although one respondent’s father had used a private agricultural advisor and this farmer made a conscious decision to change to Teagasc. Most of the respondents said they were assigned (and happy to accept) their advisor when they became clients. Eleven farmers experienced having to change from one advisor to another within the past five years. For seven, this change occurred following the retirement of their previous advisor whereas for the other four, the change happened because their previous advisor relocated. In general, a change of advisor was considered a setback in terms of relationship development although in some cases, the respondents talked of a much improved relationship with a new advisor.

In the early stages of their relationship with their advisor, most respondents indicated a willingness to trust the individual because of their trust in the organisation (Teagasc). Following on from this they are conscious of the first impression the advisor creates, how their personality comes across, their accessibility in terms of returning calls, their technical knowledge, their practical knowledge

and experience of farming, their age and their communication skills. They are also influenced by the reputation the advisor has with other farmers, their trustworthiness and honesty, their willingness to find out information, and the level of interest or passion they have for their job. The importance of the first few encounters is captured by one respondent who said “*generally after the first or second interaction, I'll know fairly quickly if I'm going to like them or not*”.

The qualities that farmers valued in the advisor

Almost all farmers who participated in the study expressed a high level of trust in their advisor. Most of them indicated that this trust developed within the first year of their working relationship. They also indicated that the longer the relationship continued successfully, the stronger the trust became but that a poor experience would undermine this trust very easily.

Technical expertise was highly valued by all respondents and it was also an expectation that all advisors working for Teagasc would be well qualified and kept up to date through in-service training. Linked to expertise was experience whether through years working as an advisor or coming from a farming background and all respondents were clear that there was no point in having an advisor with a high level of technical expertise if they were not good communicators. More than half the respondents also expressed a preference for younger advisors who were perceived to be more ‘up to date’ whereas they perceived some older advisors to be ‘stuck in their ways’. Among the respondents there was also a preference for an advisor who came from a farming background and/or one who is currently engaged in farming. They explained that such advisors could understand their realities better and that everything can’t be done ‘by the book’. One respondent who has a strong relationship with his cooperative advisor commented that “*my co-op advisor is a farmer himself milking cows, he knows exactly what I'm talking about... He has his finger on the pulse, if I say something to him, he's been through it himself, and he's not talking to me from a distance or from a theoretical situation....*”.

The importance of a common or shared experience to the advisory relationship was also raised by one of the female respondents who said “*having a female advisor makes a big difference, it's hard for women in business. It's nice as a woman to be dealing with a woman. Sometimes men*

can try taking advantage of women farmers.” The male respondents didn’t indicate a preference for male or female advisors.

Overall the most important qualities that all of the respondents highlighted were the soft skills, the ability to communicate and build relationships of trust. While each respondent discussed these qualities in slightly different ways and words, they focused on wanting an advisor who was approachable and likeable, who was reliable and would be there when they needed them even if this was just at the end of the telephone line. One respondent commented *‘I don’t want to be getting their voicemail all the time’*. The communication skills that respondents valued included being able to explain things clearly and simply, being honest and also able to challenge the farmer’s ways of thinking or doing. A typical comment was *“She doesn’t waffle, and she’ll give her honest opinion regardless of whether she thinks what I’m doing is right or wrong”*. Another respondent discussed the importance of feeling that the advisor is interested in their particular circumstances: *“He is also interested in the family associated with the farm and in trying to improve the quality of my life by trying to simplify my farming system so as to reduce my workload.”* One respondent who was not happy in his advisory relationship was clear that his advisor would need to express a lot more interest and enthusiasm for the job and increase the level of contact if the farmer was to gain any real value from the advisory relationship.

Some of the respondents were members of farmer discussion groups and while they appreciated the group as a good method for knowledge transfer and for meeting with other farmers, most said that they like to have quality one to one contact time with their advisor each year. This individual meeting provides farmer-clients with opportunity to discuss in greater detail issues and queries relating to their own particular farming circumstances.

The advisors’ influence on farmers’ practices and decision making

Respondents were also asked about the kind of issues they sought advice on and whether they consulted their advisor on recent major decisions in their farm business. They were asked to reflect on whether there were any decisions they had taken or practices they had adopted that they would subscribe to the influence of their advisor. Within the last five years, the majority of farmers carried out what they described as major changes on their farms. These changes were in

areas of infrastructure investment, enterprise changes, herd/flock expansion, purchasing land and land leasing. However, less than half the farmers who implemented these changes actually involved their advisor in the decision making process which may bring into question how deep the expressed level of trust in the advisor really is. Most of the respondents were able to give examples of where they had made some change or some decision because of the influence of the advisor. Sometimes this built on learning from farm walks or from discussion groups but it generally involved continuous recommendation or encouragement from the advisor and it sometimes required challenging conversations.

Three cases can illustrate the dynamics of the relationship between the farmer and the advisor and using Jansen et al's (2010) typology can show some of the complexities of advisory relationships when it comes to knowledge exchange and farmer learning. These include the pro-activist, the do-it-yourselfer, and the wait-and-see types but not the reclusive traditionalist who doesn't engage at all.

Al is an example of a young (39 year old) dairy farmer who would be considered a **pro-activist** in seeking advice for his farm. He 'inherited' his advisor from his father when he took over the management of the farm and was naturally inclined to trust the advisor because of the history of a good relationship with his father. He meets his Teagasc advisor monthly through discussion group meetings and will also pick up the phone to him if he has a query. Al feels that at the discussion groups, his advisor presents what the best farmers are doing, and that this is the target for all other farmers to meet. He thinks more individual advice is needed to assist farmers with the changes needed on their farms to achieve these targets. When asked about an example of a decision he made where he sought guidance from his advisor, he gave the example of when he purchased new land he asked his advisor to put together a business plan for the banks to assist him with a loan application. When asked about a problem he faced, Al contacted his advisor about a nitrates issue because he had confidence in the advice that Teagasc and his advisor provide. The influence of the advisor in changing or challenging Al's thinking was manifest in his decision to finally improve the calving pattern of his herd saying *"I finally listened to what he was saying and adopted his advice. My calving is now more compact"*.

Ed is a 37 year old sheep farmer who could be considered a ‘**do-it-yourselfer**’ using Jansens’s typology. He has 1100 ewes and for him, scheme assistance is the main reason to be a client of Teagasc. He feels that with 15 years’ experience working with sheep, he requires no technical advice as he claims that he knows as much about sheep as anyone. Ed disagrees with Teagasc research that says new grass is just as good as Typhon, (a stubble turnip sown with a grass mixture to improve lamb performance). He says that he knows in his heart and soul that Typhon is better as he’s been growing it over 7 years now and manages to finish nearly all his lambs off it without meal. Ed expanded his flock size from 600 to 1100 ewes but he didn’t see any need to consult his advisor as it was something that he just wanted to do. However he did give an example of a positive input from his advisor when he had planned to reclaim land but had not investigated archaeology issues associated with the area. His advisor told him to check this out first and thus he avoided receiving a cross compliance penalty.

Sean, a 46 year old dairy farmer could be considered as a ‘**wait-and-see-er**’. He discussed the importance of the encouragement he has received from his advisor. He is a regular attendee at farming events and he had been thinking for a long time about whether or not to introduce cross-breeding into his dairy herd but he lacked the confidence and stated that “*without encouragement and reassurance from my advisor, it’s unlikely that I’d have adopted this breeding strategy into my herd*”. Sean had previously contacted his advisor when he had a farm accounts difficulty and the response had been helpful and positive and this had increased his confidence in considering other issues and problems.

The perspective of the advisors

The farmer-advisor relationship is a two way street. The four advisors were asked about the clients that they find the easiest and most rewarding to work with and they described their ideal client as enthusiastic, honest and trustworthy, having a positive attitude and an agreeable personality, being easy to approach, willing to engage in a discussion group and to ask questions. They also liked working with clients who appreciated their service and who were ‘loyal’ and for them the rewarding relationships were ones where farmers actually took up their advice and put it into practice on their farms.

Advisors highlighted the ageing profile of farmers and a lack of farm successors as the main barriers to adoption of new technologies on farms. They felt that older farmers were less willing to adopt changes as they have gotten by to date without them. They also discussed how some clients are reluctant to adopt new recommended technologies because of fear that change brings additional workload and cost.

The four advisors interviewed were conscious of the need to work on their relational competencies in order to engage better with different types of farmer clients. One of the advisors talked about completing CECRA¹ modules which had helped in improving her skills in listening and on how to provide effective advice to farmers. Overall the four advisors said they would like to be able to provide more bespoke advice to farmers on a one to one basis, preferably through farm visits, expressing interest not only in farmer-clients, but in their personal lives and family, contacting farmers who are going through a difficult time to offer support and concern for them, remembering previous events that occurred on farms and lastly, organising trips to public events that would be of interest to clients.

Discussion

The interviews with farmer clients and with advisors illustrate some aspects of the advisory relationship in practice and its complex and dynamic nature. The way in which farmers view and engage with advisory services is not uniform and the ways in which they seek or receive advice depends on a multitude of factors. The farmers interviewed in this study were at different stages in their farming careers. Some were at similarly ambitious stages in farm development or expansion yet they ranged from seeking high levels of consultation on major farm decisions to high levels of self-reliance and scepticism about the ‘official’ advice. Those who were enthusiastic about their advisory relationship ranged from different levels of farming intensity and stage in their farming career. The common thread that linked all of them to the advisory service was the need for confidence in their advisor’s support in completing and submitting applications for EU and government schemes and ensuring compliance with the requirements of same. The reputation of the organisation (Teagasc) was central to their becoming clients. It is clear that once the initial engagement takes place, the potential for a deeper engagement is

¹ European Certificate for Consultants in Rural Areas

strongly linked to the sense of trust that the farmer client has in both the advisory organisation and in the individual advisor they deal with.

This research has highlighted the importance of interpersonal skills for farm advisors in building relationships with clients. Their communication skills, their enthusiasm for their job and their clients and their capacity for building rapport were considered at least as important as their technical know-how. The farmers interviewed wanted to 'like' their advisor and wanted their advisor to understand and be empathetic to their situation. These relational competencies set the groundwork for the knowledge exchange process. The advisor can then vary and adapt his/her approach depending on their understanding of the client, whether they just want access to the best advice and will make their own decisions or whether they need a higher level of facilitation to recognise a challenge or opportunity. Carlock's (2016) model of the teacher, consultant, coach and therapist can be a useful framework for the advisor to consider for matching their approach to the client's needs. Andersen's (2004) distinction of the specialist, reflective specialist and reflective listener could be a useful way of increasing self-awareness for advisors about how they view a farm problem. Do they see the farmer's lack of know-how as the problem? Do they see their role as understanding where the farmer is stuck and helping them to get unstuck? Or do they see their role as asking the right questions so that the farmer can solve the problem themselves. The nature of the innovation process that will happen when an advisor is 'effective' may vary greatly depending on the philosophical viewpoint of the advisor about his/her role.

This research supports the calls by Ingram (2008), Höckert and Ljung (2013), and Hansen et al (2018) for advisors to be critically reflective facilitators so that there is greater emphasis on dialogue and mutual trust with farmers and the creation of the kind of space that enables innovation and problem solving. As Paine et al (2006) conclude, advisors need to expand the stock of trust and confidence they have with clients in order to catalyse change. This allows the farmer and advisor to work together to develop options, negotiate goals and navigate courses of action amid all the tensions that impact on the performance of any farm,

Conclusion

The main findings from this study suggest that to improve knowledge exchange and adoption of innovation among farmer-clients, a combination of high trust relationships is needed i.e. the farmer client needs to have a high level of trust in both the advisory organisation and the individual advisor with whom they interact. Trust in the advisory organisation is based on reputation and previous experience while trust in the individual advisor is linked to a number of attributes and behaviours. Where the level of trust in the individual advisor is high, the outcomes ranged from increased requests for technical and business advice to the client considering and adopting innovations they would not otherwise have considered. The study findings have implications for the recruitment, training and management of advisory personnel.

The current thrust of research into farmer-advisor relationships and how they impact on knowledge transfer and exchange is vital. We need to understand more deeply the nature and dynamics of the advisory relationship over time in order to really respond to the needs of farmers in a time when the challenges facing agriculture require so much more than a technical fix. The formation and continuous professional development of advisors needs to pay more attention to the softer skills - the so called relational competencies that allow an advisor to build relationships of mutual trust with clients.

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