
Research reports

Carpe diem – seizing the day. Successful engagement in a changing society

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Summary

Society is constantly changing. The people we seek to engage are no different. Successful engagement in a changing society requires continual assessment of our communication techniques. This will mean examining time worn methods to ensure we continue to be successful.

One way to continue to successfully engage others is to understand their basic values and key drivers. Many of these are influenced by society. Examining current societal values can help us do this, as can critical analysis about how society may change in the future.

This paper describes five key societal changes since at least the 1980s: the increased busyness of people and the world; the workplace gender revolution; the decrease in public investment in education; the demographic shift in the workforce/community; and the information technology revolution. It describes how these changes are impacting in our society and poses ideas about how we can continue to successfully engage people in a changing society.

Society – where are we now?

In an ideal world, attendees at any meeting of adults will be a mixture of young and mature, male and female, and the well trained through to the trainees, apprentices and students. Many of these people will be at least computer literate, most experienced computer users. Mobile phones and other electronic devices will be common.

Many workplace, stakeholder or community meetings and groups are less than the ideal described above. Such gatherings are often dominated by males in the mid to late stages of their careers (or retirees), who are often well trained and/or educated, sometimes with a wealth of experience, and in comparison to their younger counterparts, more commonly technology avoiders.

Australian society is far more diverse than this, it is multi-cultural, multi-age, and has people with a range of different education levels and differing attitudes to the adoption of new technology. Engagement of much of this diverse community is needed if we are going to achieve broad community support for our objectives. This paper outlines some ideas about how to engage the Australian community as broadly as possible. Five key changes in Australian society over the last 30 years are examined. Suggested actions to embrace society members who are faced with these changes are outlined. Key statistics and quotes to introduce each premise are drawn from Mackay (2007).

The increased busyness of people and the world – the unattended meetings

‘Everyone is busy. Even people who aren’t busy feel obliged to say they are busy. “How are you going – busy?” has become our standard greeting...’ (p. 7, Mackay 2007).

The quote above illustrates two important societal aspects. Firstly, there never seems to be enough time to do everything we need to do, let alone those things we should be doing. This is hardly a new thing. More importantly though it illustrates that people expect us to be busy and specifically ask if we are, even if this greeting about our busyness is unconscious.

People have competing priorities, and even if they are very interested in attending meetings, workshops, field days, conferences and or just catching up, competing demands will not always make attendance possible. This will be more of a problem during peak holiday periods such as school holidays, around long weekends and/or special events (for example Christmas, Easter, Anzac day, Queen’s birthday weekend or local race, show or public holidays). Similarly, any time not during working hours including

breakfast, dinner and on weekends may be problematic, although this is not always the case. Scheduling of events overlapping with any of these times, or in shoulder periods around these times may also result in poor attendance as these times may be used for travel.

Even if all the conflicting times outlined above are accounted for, people may still not attend our meetings. It is wise for organizers to review why this may have occurred. One of the key reasons why people are likely to attend is that they have a strong interest in the issue and/or the outcome. Conversely, people are unlikely to attend an event they have little or no interest in.

Getting people with a strong interest in the issues and outcomes to attend meetings can be enhanced by good advertising, reminders before the meeting and appropriate follow up after the meeting. This is only part of the solution however. There is a broader need to engage these people to move forward with the issue. Future attendance is compromised when people are not actively engaged within the meeting and if their participation and comments are given little regard.

One of the most effective means of ensuring that people continue to attend our events in their otherwise busy lives is to ensure that they get a result or outcome. If nothing has changed for them or in their world, or if they have not achieved some sort of outcome to the issue/s that they are concerned with, attendance will suffer.

Problems may arise when decisions need to be referred to higher levels of management than those present at a meeting. Often these issues are either not followed through, or are actively blocked. To overcome this, people in higher management must be engaged, willing to listen and to act right from the start of the process. Ideally, resolution of certain issues needs to be communicated back to meetings so that committees are confident that something is actually happening.

There are a number of other reasons as to why people do not attend events. For example, events may be unwelcoming, be long and tiring, not resolve specific issues (and deal with trivialities), there may be too many issues to resolve in the meeting, the meeting may be poorly organized and conducted and may even be dominated by certain personalities that disrupt conducive and friendly meetings. There are many other reasons of course!

Well run and organized meetings help. For example, meetings should be organized with background papers sent out before hand, with requests that attendees read them. A much shorter meeting results when business is dealt with as if people have read the papers, to say nothing of encouraging the desired behaviour of pre-reading for the next meeting.

Starting the meeting on time, welcoming and talking with people before and after meetings, keeping meetings short and considering breaking long meetings up with rest periods are all helpful strategies. In addition, the chair should ideally keep the agenda short and run to time but allow time for appropriate discussion. Importantly, the chair will control issues that could side track the meeting allowing discussion on them at some point at the end of the meeting. Limiting other disruptive input is an important chairing duty.

Is increased busyness a problem of time management? Should everyone be going to time management courses to help prioritization of the really important things in their lives, including relaxation and family time? Although useful, it will not solve the basic problem, that of competing priorities and the fact that choices will always need to be made about what to do and what to leave undone.

The following points are useful to consider when organizing an event to ensure interested and engaged people attend, and if needed, keep attending:

1. Get to know the stakeholders and do what suits them, for example, some farmers may prefer breakfast meetings;
2. Identify the key reasons why people would attend and try to address issues they are interested in (the outcome/s they would like to see) and accommodate their needs, for example the need for socialization;
3. Identify the key issues that need to be resolved, or the key information you as the organizer need to communicate, and do so;
4. Ensure management supports progression of these issues;
5. Give feedback to the attendees of successful resolutions, where appropriate;
6. Schedule meetings so that they do not clash with holiday periods, long weekends or special events;
7. Communicate with the potential audience using multiple methods. This may include initial notices and reminders. Use more than one method, for example telephone, email and newsletter. For a wider audience, consider the radio, internet, email and newspapers; and
8. Run good meetings, including recognition and presentations that allow different people to learn in different ways.

The workplace gender revolution

'In the last 20 years from 1986 to 2006, workforce participation rates for women aged 25–54 have risen significantly... in the 45–54 age group... participation has risen from 52% in 1986 to 76% in 2006' In the same period, participation of 25–34 year old women has risen from 59 to 73% and for 35–44 year

olds from 63 to 74% (pp. 62–3, Mackay 2007).

There are likely to be many reasons for the significant increase in workforce participation by women. Whatever the reason/s, many women in our society now view the world with the knowledge that 'girls are free to be whoever and whatever they want to be' (Mackay 2007). Such a revolution is long over-due.

Although these changes are happening in the community, they are not always reflected in the representation we see from stakeholders, on committees, or at events. Again, there are likely to be a number of reasons why this is the case, but at least three questions need to be asked:

1. Can society afford not to engage and use the intellect, skills and talents of women (around 50% of the adult population) and still do the best job?
2. Is it difficult for women who are part of committees to continue to engage with those committees? and
3. Are there things that people do that prevent new women from reasonably attending our committees and events?

To male readers, these questions would be best directed to female colleagues, wives, partners, sisters, daughters and mothers to ensure a correct female perspective is gained.

It is likely that at least some of the following suggestions need serious consideration to encourage and retain female participation in committees and events.

1. Mention that mobile phones can be set on silent mode in meetings so that mothers (and fathers) can be alerted discreetly to any problems with dependent children in care.
2. Conduct meetings and events when children are in care or at school, that is from 9.00–9.30 onwards, and probably not during holidays.
3. Be flexible in meeting times and dates to allow key women to participate.
4. Have decent coffee available and a nice place to have the meeting, with facilities for men and women, and children if necessary. You may be surprised the difference this can make.

The decrease in public investment in education

One of the nations foremost academics, Professor Barry McGaw has found that public investment in Australian universities has fallen 7% in the past decade compared with an average increase of 48% in OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries (p. 20, Mackay 2007). Furthermore, between 1995 and 2003, the public funding share of total tertiary education has fallen from 65% to 48% placing our country 25th in the OECD.

This affects society in a number of ways, not only in access to education for future

generations. Less investment in tertiary education (Technical And Further Education (TAFE), and Universities) will result in less people being trained in all fields of science, and in particular for many readers, weed management, weed science and natural resource management. The demographic shift to an older workforce (discussed later) already means that there are fewer people to fill jobs, and as always, those jobs in the least desirable locations are hardest to fill. Already weed and environmental officers, project officer and government specialist positions are becoming harder to fill. This is not a desirable situation to continue the war on weeds, pests or for natural resource protection.

Lobbying government representatives for increased investment in education and training is one key strategy to help reverse this situation. There are a number of other things employers and individuals can do:

1. Increase the training opportunities available to all staff. Examples of training providers include the Industry and Investment NSW Weed Officers training program, TAFE, private training companies and Universities. Our staff will thank us for it.
2. Identify young staff with leadership potential so that mentoring and training, either formally or informally, can begin early.
3. Identify leading weed officers and other professionals who have expertise in certain professional areas and organizing group training sessions on a regional basis.
4. Make approaches to tertiary institution staff to discuss staff training requirements. This may result in more tailored training opportunities for existing or new staff, trainees or apprentices. Teaching part of any new course material may be an unexpected opportunity that results.
5. Approach funding and educational bodies for support of students via scholarships or prizes. This may include State and Australian government departments, Catchment Management Authorities or Natural Resource Management Boards, TAFE and Universities. It may also include State or National professional organizations, for example state weed societies and weed officers associations.

Increased public investment in targeted education can result in a self perpetuating cycle of increased awareness and funding as a critical mass of well trained staff is achieved.

The demographic shift in the workforce/community

Like many other western countries, the birth rate in Australia is far below replacement rate, that is our population is shrinking not growing. That statement does not

consider the impact of immigration. At the same time the baby boomers, the largest generation of children born in Australia started retiring in 2006 and will continue to do so over the next 10–15 years. These retirees will enjoy greater longevity than previous generations, and in all likelihood will be busier and more involved in the community and the workforce (p. 88–9, Mackay 2007).

It is likely that committees and stakeholders will increasingly reflect this demographic change with more people having left full time work now consulting, attending and participating in meetings, and even doing part time work (paid and voluntary). This change represents a number of opportunities to capitalize on.

1. The corporate knowledge that the baby boomers has will not be lost despite a general lack of mechanisms in work places to pass this knowledge on. Having said this, it will be important to consider how best to acquire and record this knowledge.
2. Workplace duties may need to be restructured to account for the physical abilities of many part time (including post-retiree) staff.
3. An active effort to engage the baby boomer generation should be made particularly in committees and stakeholder meetings. This generation may well have the experience and knowledge about how to resolve the issues we are currently confronted with.
4. Increasing numbers of retirees, many well educated, may wish to volunteer. Insurance and Occupational Health and Safety issues are two of the many issues that will need to be resolved so that will this keen new band of volunteers is best utilized.

Overall, Western society needs to slow down the pace of our lives, to listen and respect the wisdom of those older than us if we are going to learn the lessons that society has already learnt.

The information technology revolution

Use of the mobile phone and/or computers is now ubiquitous. The last 30 years have seen the introduction of computers at work and at home, and the last 20 years the introduction of the internet, both a source of information and time-wasting, the personal organizer and the mobile phone. Increasingly mobile phones are connecting us with the world of email and the internet as are portable computing interfaces – tablets such as the Kindle™ and the iPad.

Email has become popular and with it the introduction of list-servers and discussion groups. These are where a message or query can be sent via email to a group of like-minded subscribers who may be able to answer questions posed

by any subscriber. One of the most useful of these is the Enviroweeds listserv that serves as a conduit for discussion about the management of environmental weeds. Electronic newsletters (e-newsletters) are also becoming popular and, in some cases, replacing traditional paper newsletters.

Similarly, internet based discussion groups or forums have become popular. The most commonly used group of these are blogs (weblogs), where comments and commentary can be regular added and updated. In addition, discussions can occur over many days and at any time of the day or night. A shorter version are the microblogs, where brief text updates can be transmitted using services like Twitter by various means including email, the internet and the mobile phone. A similar mobile phone service, the SMS – Short Message Service has been common for at least a decade and can be useful to send reminders to people about events.

There are other ways to communicate with people. Podcasts are a series of audio or video files that can be distributed over the internet allowing downloading when new content is added. Webinars are generally one-way internet conferences involving a speaker addressing an audience and where participants can email questions to be answered during or after the presentation. When combined with teleconferencing and video-conferencing facilities, multiple sites can be linked allowing almost instant information exchange. Skype allows users to make telephone calls over the internet, and when people use web cameras, they can also interact face-to-face.

What does this information revolution mean as people try to engage committees, stakeholders and the community?

1. People are increasingly visiting the internet to access information, especially from sites that they perceive as having quality reliable information. For example, 72% of people seeking information on an environmental topic or issue in 2009 tried the internet, with 59% using the internet first (DECCW NSW 2010). This means it will be crucial to maintain and improve our websites so that they are dynamic, up-to-date sources of information, events and activities.
2. People are also increasingly using list-servers and blogs to source information from people they have never met, often experts in another state, country or across the world.
3. People now frequently use teleconferencing for meetings and will increasingly use video-conferencing or webinars as the costs and technical difficulties sometimes associated with these technologies decrease. Multiple site video-conferencing is now standard at Universities or workplaces with multiple campuses or sites.

4. While people will continue to use paper, and may prefer to read a hard copy of a publication, many people increasingly source information they perceive as non-critical from e-newsletters, from podcasts and the internet. People will increasingly use tablet-style technology for work and leisure reading.
5. SMS use will increase as a tool of the future and be used to send short reminder messages, while Skype may be increasingly used for long distance communication.
6. Many people are very comfortable about transacting business over the internet. This may mean that increasingly people will register and pay for events or products in this way. It also means that people will submit papers for conferences over the internet (as opposed to email), and increasingly conduct virtual conferences. Already people submit photos for identification of unknown plant and invertebrate species using the internet.

The way forward?

Australian society is increasingly an instant and dynamic society, where information is being transmitted both quickly and easily. Stakeholders are going to increasingly demand that we also do the same.

Conversely, many people do not like change or at least change at such rapid pace. Despite this, the younger generations in the workforce are adherents to the centuries old maxim 'the only thing constant in life is change' (a surprisingly antiquated statement, attributed to François de la Rochefoucauld, a French Classical author, 1613–1680 AD). Perhaps another quote is needed to adapt to this change, which in Latin is *Carpe diem*, or in English is 'Seize the day' (which is even more antiquated and has been attributed to Horace, the Ancient Roman Poet, 65–8 BC).

Disclaimer

This paper represents the opinion of the author and in no way represents the official position of the authors' employer.

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