

Improving Agriculture with Communications Technology

In leading this multi-disciplinary project, Rachel Hay was driven by the desire to see agriculture in her own region, and others like it, grow. Regional areas do not have access to the same things that urban areas do, and Hay wanted to investigate what agricultural technology might be available to help. She discovered through consultation that good internet connection in regional areas could help with agricultural tasks as diverse as checking water sources and observing cattle remotely, and thus could help to increase food security. So she set about understanding why people weren't connecting and what would help them to connect.

Hay's first concern, though, was she knew little about ag-tech, so she recruited Ian Atkinson from eResearch, James Cook University and Ed Charmley from CSIRO to help her understand the technology requirements of the project. Together, they piloted community consultation studies to understand who was using and making decisions about purchasing technology. Some of the partners in the consultation process included Apple, Telstra, NBN, the Isolated Children and Parents Association, and the community group Better Internet for Rural and Remote Australia. In return, Hay used her expertise in marketing to encourage local ag-tech developers to recognise women as decision makers in the adoption of agricultural technology.

Hay and her team worked through an iterative series of interviews and analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, of data gathered to understand why men in the regions were resistant to using technology. Their research discovered that men didn't think they could use it or that they were not capable of learning how to use it. The team eventually produced an integrated communications plan and wrote a public relations campaign including media releases to share knowledge around technology adoption and increase its usage in the regions. Conversations with ag-tech developers changed their perspective of how they marketed material around ag-tech products.

Ultimately, Hay and her team set out to create real behaviour change around ag-tech and telecommunications in regional areas, and so assisted with cattle management tasks towards increased production and better management practices.