

vegetablesWA Benchmarking Project — An outsider's view

Bryn Edwards, Benchmarking Lead, vegetablesWA. The project was funded by Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development's Agribusiness Innovation Fund and Hort Innovation.

vegetablesWA undertook a business benchmarking project starting in 2016. This article is a reprint of the one published in the winter edition of their magazine. It provides a useful insight into the project. DPIRD is currently investigating the option of rolling out a similar project across all horticulture sectors in Western Australia.



Bryn Edwards, Benchmarking Lead, vegetablesWA

Having completed and published the third year of vegetable industry benchmarks I thought I'd take time to share some thoughts, reflections and observations from across the three years.

As someone with no background in Horticulture or Agriculture prior to starting the project but a 16+ years background in solving some major business problems and challenges in a variety of business sectors across the world, you could take this as an outsider's view looking in – although my look in has been up close and personal over the past three years.

To be clear when I get involved in a project or initiative, I don't take it lightly; if I'm going to get involved, I get involved – which I quickly began to realise was a trait I have in common with most growers.

In the beginning, I thought that winning the funding for three years and convincing Australia's foremost leading agricultural benchmarking specialists, Planfarm, to partner with us was the toughest part...

I was surprised initially by the sceptical and frosty response I received in the first year from a large number of growers. In fact I was baffled – here I am offering a free service (which would normally cost \$6,000 to \$8,000 privately) that will pin point and help

you understand where you could increase profitability year-on-year and where to steer your business to deliver some future prosperity and most weren't interested – it just didn't make sense to me.

The first year did test my resolve and there were times when I questioned myself and the process. However, there were a number of brave growers who gave me the time and decided to participate – I am super grateful to each and every one of them because without that the initiative would have been dead in the water (much like a similar initiative that was started at the same time in Victoria).

Taking those first growers through the process of gathering up data, analysing and then sitting with them to really critically analyse the results was super-rewarding as I could visibly see the impact that I knew the process would deliver to those who got involved.

To be clear, these sessions are not easy going for the grower. The results lay bare not just the true performance of the business on many levels, but also the consequences of all the decisions they have made during that year both longer term and short term focused.



While the sessions can be confronting, all growers stated how very necessary they are because they cut through the b/s stories that we tell ourselves and dispel any myths that we might have bought into that aren't quite serving us or our business – and let's not forget, while there is a lot of romance in being connected to the land and growing vital produce for others, the function of your business is to provide you and your family with the resources (i.e. money) to shape the life you want and open up greater options and decisions.

By going through the process, growers also remarked on how educational it was. Many just simply hadn't had any solid or robust financial and business management training in the past. They knew how to grow great produce but couldn't stay on top of the money side and were all so often left confused as to why all their efforts and labours didn't result in the level of returns in their pocket.

It was during these sessions and listening to growers that I began to get a better understanding behind the reception I had received during that first year.

During the first year I would frequently be told 'I'm not sharing my information with anyone', 'Why would I do that?', 'Sounds too much like hard work', 'Too busy, mate'.

Through engaging more growers and listening to them I began to realise that a core reason behind the lack of take-up was a widespread gap in understanding relating to the dynamic relationship between strategic planning, managing figures, business management, marketing and informed decision making. And how by understanding this it can put you in a position of much greater control across your business and less at the whim of outside pressures.

To add to this there is a very human element – pride and the feeling of self-efficacy or self-confidence. No one likes to feel like they don't know what they're doing or that they're not on top of everything – particularly if you're male (which I can honestly attest to!).

While the genuine foundational intentions of benchmarking are to help you to flourish, the process, and the light it shines into your business, can bring about a situation that triggers those thoughts or questions that sense of knowing what you're doing.

And so, it was with a deeper level of understanding of the underlying issues that we progressed into the following years of the benchmarking initiative. By being more aware and pitching the conversations at that level we were able to bring more growers on board to participate and build the dataset up to where it is today.

To be clear, there is still a long way to go across the industry – just as a world-class 100m sprinter will never be able to run fast enough because he always wants to go faster – so too, I believe, should growers want to continuously get better and better at managing their business. The industry faces many challenges and successful businesses can meet that challenge more

successfully from a place of inside knowledge and informed decision making rather than from a place of hoping and blaming the outside world – which is a very weak business planning strategy.

The great thing is that filling the gap in understanding is a straightforward job to do but it does need both parties to come to the table honestly acknowledging what is and isn't in place.



What has been super pleasing has been playing a role in the acceleration of the business management skills and the strategic thinking of the growers who've participated.

Over the past three years, we've seen growers make some impressive improvements and changes — this extends beyond the financial performance of their business to their standard of life with their family beyond the farm.

To be honest, there's still a level of frustration within me because I know we're only scratching the surface of what the Western Australian vegetable industry is capable of, and the ingrained business consultant in me hates it when I can see inefficiencies anywhere, and the missing opportunity of more money staying in the pockets of you the growers for the tremendous effort you put in.

I am super happy I traded the corporate meeting room for 'a cup of tea and chat around the kitchen table', it's more real and genuinely means something. That's why I'm working hard to get this initiative extended for another three years because I feel like we've only just begun.

You may agree or disagree with what I've written, but I've always been clear with growers; don't come asking me about crop rotation, soil or flies – that's simply not my game. But if you want a more expansive strategic future-focused conversation then – whether it's financial or beyond – please get in touch. And that offer still stands.

Observations of a berry grower that participated

The program enabled us to learn more about our business operations. The professionalism and expertise of Bryn and his collaborators exceeded our expectation. They went through everything with us in ways that made all the technical information easy to understand and comprehend.

The project enabled us to evaluate our bottom line and identify leakages. We were able to see where we performed in comparison with the industry pooled numbers.

One issue to be aware of is the importance of record keeping. Even though we had some processes involved, participating in the project enabled us to improve our systems.

The project also enabled us to find out about rebates that we were eligible for such as the diesel rebates. We found out about it via the project when we were going through our report comparing our performance against others.

The vegetablesWA website provides information about the benchmarking project and some interviews with growers that have participated. DPIRD is currently seeking feedback as to whether other horticulture industries in WA are interested in such a project. If you are interested in participating in the project or would like more information please contact WABerryIDO@berries.net.au

