

Local tourism industry set to benefit from e-business survey

A collaborative initiative between South African and European researchers and the South African Department of Communications has tested whether an internationally applied e-business survey (EBS) methodology could be used successfully in a developing economy such as South Africa. Research partners include the CSIR and Trigrammic in South Africa, TNO in the Netherlands, and the Free University of Brussels in Belgium.

The aim of EBS is to inform industrialists and policy-makers as to *how* changes are occurring in business practice and *how much* these changes mean in terms of economic performance (productivity, competitiveness, employment, innovation). According to TNO's Pascal Verhoest, who developed the survey methodology, EBS uses qualitative indicators and quantitative estimations to measure the impacts of actual and emerging e-business practices.

“One of the reasons why studies like these are needed in South Africa is the lack of understanding of the role of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in leveraging specific industries (particularly SMMEs),” explains Tina James of Trigrammic. “In addition, there are no common indicators for e-business practices – these are needed by a number of government departments to support improved decision-making on the diffusion and uptake of ICTs.”

The pilot study took place from May to August 2005 and focused on South African SMMEs in the tourism industry, more specifically Gauteng-based tour operators, with particular emphasis on emerging operators. The results of the study were substantive and showed that the adapted methodology of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development could be used successfully, although there were some interviewer difficulties relating to the complexity and technicality of the questionnaire.

CSIR researcher, Mario Marais, points out that the findings of the pilot study should not be generalised for the tourism industry or other industries. “Sector differences are important in understanding the potential effects and benefits of ICT usage, and sector studies show very contrasting outcomes per sector and per industry,” he says.

The research team emphasises that, despite the limited scope of the pilot, the report would be of immediate value to the South African tourism industry and government departments having to make decisions on the application of ICTs to this sector.

The pilot study would have to be expanded to include more components of the tourism value chain in order to understand more fully what industry-specific and environmental factors would be most beneficial at a certain stage in its evolution. Innovation policies and industry strategies that mobilise scarce resources to stimulate ICT usage will be most effective if they take these factors into account; the EBS methodology may contribute to this.

“This study shows that despite significant advances in mobile technology, (broadband) internet is required for an industry such as tourism to compete internationally,” Verhoest comments. “A significant amount of work remains to be done in this regard.”

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[Previous page viewed](#)

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