

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the opportunities for people to use telecommuting and e-business to work remotely in rural and regional Victoria

Ballarat — 17 July 2013

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Witness

Ms E. Conn, head of injury prevention and education, KIDS Foundation.

The CHAIR — Welcome, Emma, to the Victorian Parliament’s Rural and Regional Committee’s inquiry into the opportunities for people to use telecommuting and e-business to work remotely in rural and regional Victoria. I hereby advise that all evidence taken at this meeting is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided under relevant Australian law. I also advise that any comments made outside the hearing may not be afforded the same privilege. Could you please give your full name and address?

Ms CONN — Emma Conn. I am from Torquay. I am the head of injury prevention and education at KIDS Foundation.

The CHAIR — Would you like questions as you go through your presentation or at the end?

Ms CONN — Lilian asked me to come along today to explain my personal experience of working from home or telecommuting. Just before I start I want to show a short 2-minute video of KIDS Foundation, just to give you an idea of the environment in which I work. I guess it is a bit different to a corporate environment. I just wanted to make sure that everyone understood where we were coming from. So I will start by showing that.

Video shown.

Ms CONN — Hopefully that will give you an idea of where I work. It is a national charity which is based in Ballarat. The lady who was speaking is Susie O’Neill, the CEO and founder of KIDS Foundation. She has a teaching background. My role at KIDS Foundation, as I said, is head of injury prevention and education. I started working at KIDS Foundation seven years ago.

From day one I have never been based in an office; I have always worked from home. When I was first employed at KIDS Foundation it was to deliver education programs from Geelong all the way down the Surf Coast to Portland. The funding for that came through the Alcoa Foundation. Staff were employed in that region to deliver those programs, even though our office was in Ballarat. At the time we also had an office in Melbourne. Staff were working in both offices and also remotely.

Right from the word go I was not really intending to return to work, because I had two young children. My youngest was two, my other child was about to start prep and I had not intended to go back to work. The fact that it was a work-from-home position made it attractive to me. Right from the word go KIDS Foundation has also been really flexible with the hours that I can work and how I put together my working week. If it were not for that, I would not have bothered applying for the job, and I would not have gone back to work when I did. Without the option of working from home I just would not have bothered.

Over time the position I am in has changed, and the role that I do has also changed. A lot of our funding comes from corporate partnerships, so the delivery of our education programs is really dependent on where that funding comes from. I guess that means it does not really matter where we are located. We go into all different areas right across Australia to deliver our programs. As I said, initially it was basically Geelong through to Portland, and that is why it was advertised in the Geelong area. The office at Ballarat is still our main office, but we also have staff working in Queensland, New South Wales, outer Melbourne and I am in Geelong. All of us commit to working on a Tuesday so that when we need to do meetings or conference calls — those happen on a Tuesday. Apart from that, everybody is given the flexibility to fit their hours in throughout the week wherever they like.

The office in Ballarat used to have a lot of staff in it, but as the organisation changed, our funding changed and things evolved we now only have one person in the office full time, but full time for us now is Monday to Thursday. The office now closes on a Friday, and that was really to save money on overheads and all of that sort of thing. We have the office manager in the office, and we have another staff member who comes in and does finance and accounts in the office. The rest of our staff work remotely. We are all fitted out with laptops and smartphones. We utilise various means of getting together; it does not have to be face to face. We find it works really well for us.

As I said, with staff in other states as well, we try to come together probably four or five times a year so that all the staff are together, and we sit down and have planning days and things like that. Then people go

away and get on with their own work and basically come back together to pool their ideas again. We do spend a bit of time on the phone, and having the technology that we have these days just makes it so much easier to do that without being face to face.

As I said, I started there seven years ago, and initially it was frustrating to be working remotely because the speed — the IT that we had — just was not the same. Now it has gotten better and better. We have an old system at work at the moment, and we really do want that updated. Ian was talking before about the cloud, and that is something we are looking into at the moment. Unfortunately we had a proposal that was unsuccessful. We found that out just in the last week or so. Ideally for us, if we can get the cloud system working, it would make our work life so much easier and more efficient, because we do find sometimes that the upload and download can be really slow. So I guess for us, if we could get some sort of funding to put that together, it would make it a lot easier for us to deliver what we are doing.

In terms of the other staff members who work there, a lot of our remote staff are also mums and say that the main benefit of being remote is that flexibility and the ability to actually be there for your kids if you need to pick them up from or drop them off at school. It just means that you are not traveling back and forth to work and wasting time on commuting. We find that our staff are really quite productive because, working from home, you do not have the distractions of, I guess, the chitchat in the office. If you need to speak to someone about what you want to do or what is going on, it tends to be an email with attachments followed by a phone call. Everyone has it there in front of them, and you can just sit down and look at it together. You do not have to be right next to that person to do that.

We also use Dropbox a lot at work. Files that we find too big to email get popped in the Dropbox, followed by a conversation, and everyone can pull them out of the Dropbox at the same time. That certainly makes it easier as well. As I said, just having up-to-date equipment definitely makes everything more efficient.

When I first started working there we had an audit. The person who was doing OHS at the time actually came to my house and did a bit of an audit on the study I had set up at home, which is now my office. There were a few changes made but nothing major. It was just more a case of getting some floorboards and fixing up the cords that were all over the place. It was just making sure that it was safe. I got a new chair out of it as well to make sure I was comfortable. The OHS audit gets done annually now. I just do that by myself and put it in. It gets filed. If there is anything major there that I am worried or concerned about, then they follow that up.

I think we are lucky too with the staff we have in the fact that everybody we have working there — we have some really passionate staff, and I guess because of the organisation it is, the more you work there and the more you get involved the more you want to make sure that the projects we are working on and the events are successful, because we want to benefit those we are supporting. It seems there is no doubt that everybody who is working remotely is using their time wisely; in fact I would say that the majority of us put in far more hours than we need to a lot of the time because it is there in your house. You find that you go back to it later and just finish it off because it is in your house and it is convenient to do so.

Mr HOWARD — On that score, Emma, is the basis of your work contract an hourly rate, 40 hours a week, or — —

Ms CONN — Currently I am paid to work 32 hours a week. We all use Outlook, and we all kind of log the hours we are working, but there is no real follow-up on that. I guess it is down to ‘These are the tasks you have to do’, and it is assumed you get those done. There are some weeks when you know you have things that are going to take that bit longer, and you put in a few extra hours. That might be balanced out the following week or whenever, when you might have a bit more of a quiet time. At KIDS Foundation too, because we run camps and are also on the road for our cycle challenges and things like that, a lot of our equipment comes with us — and also when we are delivering in schools. It just means that you can work from anywhere because anything you have you can pick up and take with you, pretty much.

Mr HOWARD — So, in that sense, part of your job is at home, but you are also out on the road when you are out at schools.

Ms CONN — Yes. Delivering to schools — we go in and out of schools more so at the start of the year, helping schools set it up, but then our programs have actually evolved, and a lot of our resources are electronic now as well. We are working on having a more interactive website for kids to access, and our resources that go out are mostly electronic now. We also do conference calling or Skyping with the schools, so often I have a little group of kids whom I will Skype with. Again, it does not matter where we are; we can do that from anywhere. Yes, initially there is some face-to-face contact with schools at the start of the year, but then generally for the rest of the year it is all pretty much from home.

We do produce magazines, booklets and things like that as well. All of these sorts of things that we produce and that get out to schools as hard copies are obviously done on the computer. It goes back and forth to the person who does the design — —

Mr HOWARD — So part of your role is to do desktop publishing?

Ms CONN — No, I don't; I do the content. The lady who does all of our design work is based in Queensland, but it will be me sending her content. Then she puts it all together and sends it back to me. Again, everyone is having a look at it online, basically, and they can comment. Then she makes the changes. When it is finally done it is printed and published, and the delivery of that could be to our Ballarat office and distributed from there, or it could be elsewhere.

We are also fortunate because we have a number of corporate partners around the country that support our programs and are happy for us to use their facilities for various things. In Sydney, for example, when we put on the lady who is working for us from New South Wales we advertised in the Sydney papers, and then they assisted us with some of our initial filtering of applicants. Once it had been short-listed Susie and I went to Sydney and used their offices to conduct interviews, meetings and things like that and then put her on. She works from home, but she has the facilities there. If she wants to use them, she can go in and use a bit of office space. So they are happy to do that as well. We work with Xstrata as well, and they have been really great in supporting us when we are in that region. Often, even for our cycle challenges and things like that, they will come along, support us and help us out with other things. I guess, although we have the Ballarat office as our base, we have other places that we are able to utilise, which makes things easier as well.

Mr DRUM — Emma, do you get any government funding?

Ms CONN — Not from Victoria at the moment. We have in the past. We have had some funding in Queensland as well, from government.

Mr DRUM — Any federal funding at all?

Ms CONN — No. We would love some.

Mr DRUM — I think we all take our hats off to the work you are doing. What percentage of your work would be spent on prevention versus — —

Ms CONN — The recovery side of it?

Mr DRUM — The recovery and treatment support.

Ms CONN — For me personally I am all about the prevention, but then we have other team members who work in the recovery. We run two camps a year at the moment. One is specifically for teens and children, and that is on self-esteem and overcoming the adversities that they face. We have a family camp as well, which runs annually. It does not matter who in the family has been through the trauma; everybody comes along to camp. There is a fair bit of planning and organising that goes into those things. Because it

is a national support network, all the registrations and everything are done online, so we do not manually handle a lot of that, because we utilise online systems.

It is the same with our events that are raising our funds. We use GoFundraise at the moment. We were using Everyday Hero but have changed to GoFundraise because it has the facility to do ticketing for events. It also prints out reports and things for us as well. Those kinds of things are great. The only downfall is that they do take a portion of your donations. But considering the amount of work it cuts out for us, it is fantastic. It is an easy process for us.

I guess a lot of our stuff is in education. We believe that prevention is obviously the best way to go. Hopefully, if we can get our programs out to all the preschools and primary schools, we will have less people coming along to our camps.

Mr DRUM — In your video there are a lot of burns victims. Is that a large proportion of your — —

Ms CONN — It is, yes. We have the Burn Survivors' Network. The camp that we run is Camp Phoenix, and the majority of people who come along to that are burns survivors. Although we welcome anyone who has undergone life-changing injury, the majority of them are burns survivors.

The CHAIR — Emma, what could a government do to encourage, and what support do people like you need for, working remotely?

Ms CONN — I think for us it is probably about getting the funds to set up the most efficient systems. At KIDS we have investigated that, and at the moment we believe that the cloud is the best way to go. It would just make everything far more efficient for us. Obviously because we are a charity, finding those funds is difficult, because we would rather be spending on the kids we are trying to support than the infrastructure.

The CHAIR — When it comes to businesses, we could say to a business, 'Here, you make an investment, and you make a saving and get a return on your investment'. What you are saying is there is probably room for the government to support not-for-profits to move into this area?

Ms CONN — Definitely, yes. It would be wonderful. Recently we submitted for a grant, through The Ballarat Foundation. It was for a Telstra grant to update our system and get the cloud and everything. Unfortunately it was unsuccessful, so we now need to go to a new plan to try to get that under way. I think that is the frustration for my colleagues at work. There are some days where it is just slow, and that can be frustrating.

Mr TREZISE — So you have had government funding in the past, Emma?

Ms CONN — Yes, in the past we have, through WorkSafe and then — —

Mr TREZISE — How long ago was that? That was state government funding, was it?

Mr HOWARD — Yes, it was five years or so ago?

Ms CONN — Yes, probably about five years ago. At the moment most of our funding is coming through our own fundraising events, and our corporate partnership is happy to put that safety message back out into the community. That just means we go where the funding is. That is, I guess, why our programs have changed — so that we can deliver anywhere in Australia and make the most of the technology that is available.

Mr DRUM — Do the cohort of the kids that you support come from anywhere? Do they come from Edenhope one minute and from the middle of Melbourne the next?

Ms CONN — Yes. The people we are supporting are from all across Australia, and the camps we run change each year. People are in different states, and they just come to wherever the camp is. Their attendance at the camp is subsidised by our fundraising and what we can — —

Mr DRUM — Who determines what schools you get to put your fingerprint on?

Ms CONN — At the moment, because our funding is corporate based, it has a lot to do with where those corporates are and the communities they want involved. For example, with the Alcoa Foundation it is around their sites — so the Point Henry, Anglesea and Portland sites — and with Xstrata in New South Wales it is the Singleton area and around Picton, which has a smaller community. It is them that dictate that. Obviously we would love to be in every school across the country, but we cannot afford to do that without the funding, so we are just going wherever we can get the funding, really.

Mr KATOS — Obviously teleworking has worked for you, Emma.

Ms CONN — Definitely.

Mr KATOS — But have any of your colleagues tried it and it was not for them? Do you get a turnover?

Ms CONN — Yes, we have had some staff who have come on board and have probably found that it has not suited them. But, like I said before, we are a small team doing a huge job, and I think anyone who is not suited stands out straightaway. Those of us who are there now — everyone — are heads down, getting on with the job, happy with what they are doing and it suits them. For me, my work day starts every morning with my kids getting on a bus at 8 o'clock. So I walk them down to the bus, and then I get down to the beach, go for a run with the dog and come back. It is a beautiful start to my day. I then sit down at my laptop. By 9 o'clock I am ready to go. Then when they finish school they come in, and I am there. My husband still works shiftwork, so there is always one of us home. For us, it is a perfect balance.

The CHAIR — I suppose that is an interesting answer. Why does it not work for some people? You said they have started, but it does not work for them. Why does it not work? If we are to look at how to get more people to adopt it, we have to understand why it does not work for some.

Ms CONN — I think the people we have had who it has perhaps not worked for may just find it difficult to focus when they are by themselves, or maybe they like the interaction of an office. I like the peace and quiet, because I find I can focus better and get on with it, and there is less interruption. I think it is definitely more suited to some people than others. I find when I do go into the office that there is, to some degree, a bit of time wasted standing around the old water cooler and chatting away about whatnot. For me, if I have something to say, then I am on the phone, and there is more purpose to the conversation. But, like I said, obviously for some people that is not ideal.

Mr HOWARD — It is interesting. When your job was advertised, was it as a work-at-home position?

Ms CONN — Yes.

Mr HOWARD — Presumably Susie had made this decision. Were you one of the first she employed that way, or had she made that decision a little while before?

Ms CONN — No, the organisation has been running now for 20 years, and I have been there for the last seven. I guess the thing was that initially when I started working there, there were people in Melbourne, people in Ballarat and myself and the other staff member who was employed at the time. I am not sure if we were the first ones to be working from home, but there was certainly not anyone else there at that point working from home. It was just us two.

Mr HOWARD — It was quite an advanced decision that Susie made, obviously.

Ms CONN — Yes.

Mr HOWARD — Because she had already planned ahead to know that she was going to provide your — she provided your laptop?

Ms CONN — Yes.

Mr HOWARD — And the other equipment, and then with the OH and S follow-up it seems as though she had obviously picked up the concept and gone into it in pretty good detail in terms of how you could employ staff at home before she took you on?

Ms CONN — Yes. Because at the time the funding was coming from the Geelong region I think to her it made sense to have people there. Initially we were out in schools a lot more, but as the school programs have changed there is less contact with the school and more resourcing. But now, because it works so well for us, and I think because obviously Susie saw the benefit of it, there is more and more — it has been embraced and other staff have been employed who work from home. It has been recognised that you do not necessarily need that face-to-face contact.

Mr HOWARD — When you started, though, you said you had children who were preschool age?

Ms CONN — Yes.

Mr HOWARD — I am wondering how that worked in with your work balance. Once you have them on the school bus that is an easier do, but did you have them in child care part of the time?

Ms CONN — Initially, because as a staff we tend to have everyone at work on a Tuesday, I had my youngest in day care on a Tuesday only. Then because my husband was working shift work, the rest of my hours I worked when he was at home. So my hours changed every week, and the foundation was happy to work around that. It just meant my son had one day a week in day care and the rest of the time was either home with his dad or home with me. So it was a pretty good balance.

Mr HOWARD — One of the other issues for people who are working full time at home is that there can be a challenge that they are not getting that social interaction that you would get in a fixed workplace with a number of other staff around you. How have you found that you have handled that?

Ms CONN — I think with the KIDS Foundation we are a little unique as well in that we do have the events and the camps and all of that, so you go away and you spend five or six days with your staff anyway, and although you are there doing a job, it is still a bonding experience with the rest of the staff. Without that it probably would be a little more difficult, so I suggest there would need to be some sort of staff get-together so that everyone does get to know each other. But we have that situation where we come together and spend a number of days together, so we do feel like we all know each other very well, and then you go off and do your own job. So with the staff that are there, although I might not see them very often, I do feel that we know each other very well because of the experiences that the foundation itself offers. We come together probably four or five times a year as a whole staff, and people will fly in for that, so we do make a point of having that time together.

Mr DRUM — Emma, do you have any assessment tools on the success of your prevention program? It is a very difficult thing to quantify, but do you have any tools?

Ms CONN — Yes, we have. We have had two independent assessments done on the program. One was recently through Social Compass, and there was one earlier as well, and all of our reports and assessments that have come back have shown that it is definitely having an impact on the schools that we are working with. So we are starting young, and what has been shown is that what they are learning early in regard to risk-taking behaviours is sticking, and it just means that the older they get, it becomes second nature rather than something they have to learn.

Mr DRUM — Do you find yourself molycoddling your own kids?

Ms CONN — No, although I do think they are probably a little more aware of certain things, and my youngest, who was very young when I started there, will often say, 'That's not safe, is it, Mum?'. But I like to think they are very independent. I do not believe in the bubble wrap. I would just like them to understand the risks and then make proper judgements.

The CHAIR — Emma, would you like to make any final comments?

Ms CONN — Just thank you for having me here today. It was good to be able to share what we do, and if we can get some funding to up our systems, that would be wonderful.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Emma, for your valuable contribution here today. In about a fortnight's time you will get a copy from Hansard of what you have said. You will be able to make changes to obvious errors and you will be able to get them corrected if the committee agrees to the change, but only to obvious errors and not to matters of substance. Once again, thank you very much for coming along.

Witness withdrew.