

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

Mansfield — 14 August 2013

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Mr Andrew Patocs, PMO manager, Keystone Management Solutions.

The CHAIR — Welcome, Andrew, to the Parliament of Victoria’s Rural and Regional Committee 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 hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided under relevant Australian law. I also advise that any comments made outside the hearing may not be accorded such privilege. For the benefit of Hansard, could you give your name and business address?

Mr PATOCS — My name is Andrew Patocs and my business address is 783 Howes Creek Road, Mansfield.

The CHAIR — Andrew, would you like questions as we go or at the end of your presentation?

Mr PATOCS — As we go. Let’s keep it fairly informal. What I want to do is give you a bit of background on where we have come from, what I do at Keystone and what Keystone is, and then see if I can address some of those criteria that have been stated.

To bring you along the journey, I have been in Mansfield for only three years, so we are fairly new to the area, with my wife and young family. We found a rural block about 10 kilometres out of Mansfield, we built very quickly and before we knew it we had moved in.

Mr HOWARD — Where did you come from before that?

Mr PATOCS — Melbourne. Melbourne-based, born and bred in Melbourne.

Mr HOWARD — So lifestyle brought you here?

Mr PATOCS — Yes, the history there is we travelled around Australia for 10 months. We thought there is more to life than Collins Street, going to the office every day, and that sparked the journey we went on. As I said, we found the block in Mansfield and before we knew it we had built a house and moved in. In fact our neighbours thought we were on witness protection because we had no jobs, we did not know anyone in the community and we had just lobbed up and built a house out of the blue — maybe a little naive, but we are making it work.

The CHAIR — And they did not find you?

Mr PATOCS — Just for the record, we are not in witness protection! We moved up for a lifestyle change of pace. My profession: I have been in IT for over 20 years, so I could maybe help Bri. For the last 10 years I have been a professional services, service delivery and PMO manager, primarily around infrastructure and software development. I worked for a number of large organisations in town, and I decided to move out here and make it work. My initial aim was to work locally. I did understand that coming to Mansfield, I would be taking a pay cut and going through that — no issue there. However, I quickly found that job opportunities, especially for a professional, are very, very limited. My scope was from Seymour to Wangaratta, and I am still looking — I still have not found that job — hence it has put me into a telecommuting role.

As we moved to Mansfield and moved into the house I contracted to Keystone on a three-day-a-week basis. I was in town for three days a week running projects. Keystone liked what I did and put me on permanently, and we negotiated for me to be able to work remotely.

Mr DRUM — Did you say you were in town?

Mr PATOCS — In Melbourne.

Mr DRUM — So you worked in Melbourne three days a week?

Mr PATOCS — Three days a week, so I would be away from home two nights a week; then I would come back. I am incredibly fortunate that I can telecommute — it is fairly rare. I work with a great company.

Who is Keystone? Keystone provides a best-practice service management toolset, primarily for the IT industry, but we are now broadening it to other industries. They call it an SaaS — software as a service — solution, where it is all in the cloud. It helps companies manage their IT in terms of incidents, problems, change configuration — that type of thing. We have about 65 employees. The company is about 10 years old — or

not quite — seven years old. We have offices in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Perth, Auckland and South Africa. Most of our work is in the Asia-Pacific region, but we are now doing a lot of work coming out of Europe and we are doing some work in the states as well.

My role: my title is PMO manager, or project management office manager, and I am effectively responsible for all professional services. We have about 50 technical consultants that work for us, and my role is to schedule them out in terms of different projects. I work with a number of engagement managers who run those projects. I maintain the governance and quality assurance of all those projects to make sure they are on time, on budget and to the customer's quality standards. I also maintain the project management knowledge base, so effectively anything that involves implementation I own. Are there any questions about my background or Keystone?

Mr DRUM — I am just inquiring about your ability to work with those other time zones.

Mr PATOCS — It means I get up at 2 in the morning and I do whatever I need to do to make it work.

Mr DRUM — So therefore poor internet access?

Mr PATOCS — With 20 years in IT, I have picked it apart. I have been battling with Telstra for two years. They could not help me. I have a colleague who worked in Telstra and was able to get some inside information. The tower on The Paps has only got a pipe yea big. When all the holiday-makers come up with their iPhones, that pipe cannot cope, so it is absolutely flooded and I could not do a thing. Even though I put a booster antenna on and did all the right things, had a full signal strength, it just could not work — impossible — so I went to satellite. God bless the NBN satellite. It is okay, but a lot of my role is comms — a lot of my work is on Skype — and there is a latency on satellite. It has to go to the satellite, come back down to earth and then go, so there is a delay.

I am working around it. Download speeds are pretty poor. They quote 6 meg; I am lucky to get 2 meg. In working with the satellite provider or retailer, iiNet, I am saying, 'Look, it's got to be better than this'. But I am too far away from the exchange to get ADSL2. I have explored 3G; the tower is not reliable enough for me. I limp along with satellite; it really hinders me in how I perform at work. My efficiencies could be a lot better as all my tools are in the cloud — for example, for resourcing technical consultants I go into a tool and manage that accordingly. Sometimes I need to sit there and twiddle my thumbs for 30 seconds for it to refresh.

I really like the idea of the hub; that would be gold. If you could provide a central point where people like me could come in every day, log on and do our day-to-day business, that would help me in a number of areas — not only in getting great download speeds but in meeting people in the community. My neighbours call me 'Igloo' because I am in my office from 8 o'clock in the morning until 8 o'clock at night. It is very rare that I have an opportunity to get out and actually meet people in the local community. I do via my wife and the CFA, those types of things, but if I could come to a hub and share ideas with people, that would be gold.

Mr HOWARD — Is there any under-utilised office space that you could link into at the moment, or have you not looked at that option?

Mr PATOCS — I have not looked at that. That is obviously an additional expense to my organisation. I think I am privileged enough to be able to work remotely without causing any waves, but if the community or the council could provide a hub, I would be there in a heartbeat.

Mr HOWARD — Do you still have to go to Melbourne?

Mr PATOCS — Yes. I work remotely four days a week and I go in to Melbourne one day a week. I fly to Brisbane, Sydney, Perth and Auckland as needed, but generally most of my time is at home.

The CHAIR — You are a fairly mobile igloo if you get around to all those places.

Mr PATOCS — Yes, I am all over the shop.

Mr HOWARD — So when you go further afield, to other parts of Australia, what is it that you have to do that you could not do locally?

Mr PATOCS — It is pressing the flesh. It is meeting the technical consultants. Sometimes there is training that needs to be done for engagement managers. It is just a good thing to actually go to meet people face to face. It is a little bit more effective. The company supports that, which is great.

Your terms of reference highlighted potential benefits as to why people come to rural Victoria. I jotted down a few. Obviously there is the lifestyle and healthy environment. It is just gold to bring up a family in Mansfield. There is no traffic. I was a little bit sick of catching the train to work every day. You are also living with really genuine people. That might be a little generic, but I find that everyone in the country is down to earth. I will just leave it at genuine; I will not elaborate.

Mr HOWARD — Just on that score — and this was also raised by Uschi and others who have spoken to us this morning — you said that when you came here you did not know anybody.

Mr PATOCS — Yes.

Mr HOWARD — In a town like Mansfield what facilities have allowed you to meet people, because it would not be through your work, would it?

Mr PATOCS — It is certainly not through my work. It is through networking, primarily through my wife, who was working in town. The CFA is also another big hook-in to the community for me. I am heavily involved in that; I am getting to meet people there, which is great. Being part of a community is a good feeling instead of just being a number in town. People really do look out for each other, which is really nice to see. Obviously the location and activities that are available here in Mansfield, like Eildon, the national parks and the ski fields are great.

Mr DRUM — Do you find the lack of communications connectivity a problem in relation to your CFA work?

Mr PATOCS — Not so much, because we are provided with CFA radios and generally they are fit for purpose for where we are. They would not put us on a truck if they were not.

Mr DRUM — Sure. So that is covered?

Mr PATOCS — Yes. It is more the home office issues that I have been having.

Mr DRUM — Just on that aspect, do you know of other people like you who are really struggling to take their business to the level they want because of a lack of communications?

Mr PATOCS — It clearly depends on the company and the role. A farmer might be going high-tech with RFID and that type of thing so that might have an impact, but for people I know it is not really an issue. It is certainly an issue for me because I am working professionally out here.

Mr DRUM — Sure.

Mr PATOCS — You mentioned best practice in your terms of reference. Obviously best practice for telecommuting will again depend on the positional roles and responsibilities for that individual, so it is probably pretty hard to nail. My broadbrush approach is that I communicate through a number of different mediums, whether it is on the phone — on my mobile or landline; I have a landline — Skype, video or mobile. It is all of the above. Another key tool I use that uses the internet is GoToMeeting. I can share a presentation remotely to over 30 people. I find that a very powerful tool for what I do.

You also highlighted a health and safety aspect. Even though I am just an office worker, according to the OHS Act 2004 and the supporting regulations in 2007 the employer must secure the health, safety and welfare for all their employees and other persons at work. This poses a number of questions. Should my employer be providing desks and equipment for me? I do not know; I am just throwing it out there. Should my employer audit my workplace and make sure it is fit for purpose in terms of an OHS perspective? I am studying it, by the way.

Mr HOWARD — Have they done anything in that regard?

Mr PATOCS — No. You have a desk, you have a phone and you have an internet connection and they say, ‘We’ll give you a computer and away you go’.

The CHAIR — There is another question there. As the employee have you raised with them what you need?

Mr PATOCS — No, I have not, to answer your question. I understand that they are responsible for that. Again, I am in a very privileged role to be able to work from home and I do not want to upset the applecart.

Mr HOWARD — Mind you, you would be mostly satisfied that your occupational health and safety is addressed.

Mr PATOCS — Absolutely. There is no question that I have bought the right chair, the right stand, and that I have done all the right things; I understand ergonomics and that type of thing so there is no issue there. The other thing is that if we do go down that path of employers having to go and look at your workspace remotely, that will incur an additional cost for them as well. They are just some thoughts I have put on the page.

Mr DRUM — Do you have any kids?

Mr PATOCS — I have one and one on the way.

Mr DRUM — Put yourself in a situation for a moment where the work you were doing was sensitive and you had to deal with sensitive clients and contracts. If you were in a situation where you had teenage kids running around the house, would that be an issue? If you were working with a whole range of companies, could you be sure that your teenage kids were not going to jump on your computer?

Mr PATOCS — That is a good point. The way we mitigate that is that all our contracts are online — in the cloud, if you like — and there is password access to get into it. Even if someone was on my computer, there is a password you would need to get through to be able to get to those documents. All the engagement plans, contracts, licence agreements and all that type of thing are wrapped up pretty tightly.

Mr DRUM — Just for your information, we are trying to identify and quantify the savings associated with companies that allow their people to work remotely. They do not need to supply car parking; they do not need to supply desk space or office space, so there is a substantial saving for companies that allow their people to work remotely.

Mr PATOCS — Yes. That could be promoted. The other thing is that a lot of companies are able to support telecommuting but they are still in the old school frame of mind. My example is that I used to work for EDS — like HP but different. I was a project manager there, and I was running projects out of Japan. Most of it was telecommuting, but they wanted me in the office for some strange reason — so that they could see me and see what I was doing. It is really old-school thinking.

If you are delivering and you can demonstrate that you are delivering, who cares where you are? You could be on the moon. I think it is an attitude change that really needs to take place, because that is really the crux of it: if the companies are willing to let people telecommute, then half the battle is won.

The CHAIR — How do they measure the output?

Mr PATOCS — They can see exactly what is going on from a project perspective. I am measured on a number of KPIs in terms of project quality, such as are we adhering to budget? Do we have a happy customer at the end of the day? There is a volume of collateral data that I put out in terms of how they measure me. There is absolutely no issue there.

The CHAIR — Keystone are quite happy that they can measure you and that they do not need to be seeing you to measure your output and the standards of the work?

Mr PATOCS — Absolutely. It is an online provider as well. What we deliver is in the cloud, so it kind of fits. In the IT world it is a pretty good fit, but with anything outside of that I think it would be a bit of a struggle. It is really about educating the employer and saying, ‘This could actually work, and you could save money, because you don’t need a set space; you could maybe provide a hot desk’. That is what we do in Melbourne: there are a couple of us who telecommute; one comes in on Monday, I come in on a Wednesday and someone

else comes in on Thursday, and we use the same desk and just hot-desk. There are savings there for the organisation.

Mr DRUM — Does it put pressure on the organisation when others who may not live so remotely also want to work from home? Do you find that you have set a precedent?

Mr PATOCS — There is a policy that has been written on it. Nine times out of 10 our engagement managers — who are like the project managers — need to be in front of a customer, managing a project face to face. Likewise for technical consultants: there are phases of the project when they have to be on site. We have tried telecommuting when we are in the design phase; it is okay, but it is not as effective. I cannot see the body language. When we say something, for example, around a design we can put the fire out straightaway. It is much more effective to be on site in that phase.

When we are in the build phase we do not care where they are, because we have got a spec we are building to. We will build it; they could be on the moon, though they are generally in the office. And they are generally in the office for peer support, so if there is something that is a bit tricky, they can say, ‘How do I do that?’ ‘Oh yeah, that’s all good’, blah, blah, blah. But there is no issue with the technical consultants working remotely in that phase.

The next part of the puzzle is that we will go back to the customer and say, ‘Look, this is what we’ve built. This is the design and what we’ve built. Let’s walk through it and make sure that we’re all happy with that before we go into what we call user-acceptance testing’. So, there are different phases where it is appropriate and some where it is not.

Mr DRUM — With those various phases and with the various employees, is it quite clear as to the roles and responsibilities and what can be done remotely, what needs to be done together and what needs to be done in front of a client?

Mr PATOCS — Absolutely. That is fundamental because the last thing you want is someone saying, ‘Hang on, Pato is working remotely. Why can’t I work remotely?’ But I am not a technical consultant, thank goodness. I am sort of at the back end of the whole operation, keeping the wheels turning.

Mr DRUM — Do you do a lot of videoconferencing with your work?

Mr PATOCS — Out of Mansfield, no, because we do not have the bandwidth. I would love to do it.

Mr DRUM — Again, a hub with bandwidth would be appealing for that?

Mr PATOCS — Yes, that would be gold.

The CHAIR — Has Keystone taken any measurement of the extra productivity of people who are telecommuting for their work, because we have heard in other places that people are actually more productive when they telecommute?

Mr PATOCS — I will put my hand up and say I am probably 50 per cent more productive working from home, because I do not have people tapping on my shoulder and saying, ‘Where do I find this document?’, or, ‘How do I do that?’, when it is all documented, and they could go and find it. Instead, from 8 o’clock in the morning until 6 at night I am locked away, and I am very efficient in what I do. Sure, I get Skype calls and that sort of thing, and that is just part of it, but I think I am way more efficient at home where I can really focus than I am in the office environment. There is no banter; there is none of that, which is good and bad. It has its pros and cons, obviously, but it really works. Like I said at the start, my aim is to work here in Mansfield or in Benalla or Wang or wherever I can. I am still looking for that plum position, but it is just a matter of time.

The CHAIR — Keystone do not have any figures on it?

Mr PATOCS — To answer your question, no. We have done no study on that.

The CHAIR — You are very confident that it is 50 per cent more?

Mr PATOCS — Yes. They are happy with the result that I am producing, so I think that speaks enough for itself.

Mr DRUM — Working in a sector that is moving so rapidly with technological advancements, how do you keep yourself up to speed? Is all that training and leading edge — —

Mr PATOCS — From a project management methodology perspective, it does not move so quickly, so what I have done is taken a number of methodologies and created a hybrid fit for purpose for Keystone and obviously looking at better ways of doing it are becoming more efficient in terms of our implementation. In terms of technology, the way we get around that is that one of our key wholesalers, if you like, who provides the base platform, provides webinars. What they do is post that webinar on site, so I can actually download it and then watch it when I need to. Obviously with some of the webinars that they post, if I do not have the right bandwidth or if it is slowing down, are a bit of a waste of time. So I will download it, and I will watch the webinar and get that input that way.

Mr DRUM — What is a webinar?

Mr PATOCS — It is like a seminar, but it is done on the Web. It might be an instruction on some new products that are coming out or that type of thing.

Mr DRUM — It is a new word for the dictionary, webinar.

Mr PATOCS — Yes. I thought everyone knew what a webinar was. It is like a seminar but on the web.

The CHAIR — Are there any final comments you would like to leave with us, Andrew?

Mr PATOCS — It has been an interesting process to go through, and I certainly appreciate the opportunity to come and speak to you. I would love to see the output — in December, I think it is?

The CHAIR — No. It will be the first sitting day after 31 December, which will be early February.

Mr PATOCS — I will be really interested to see the output and what actions have actually come out of that or what the deliverables have been. I do not know how many people you are speaking to, but you are certainly going across the state. I will be interested to see what sort of deliverables in stone that come out of this and what actually gets signed off, I suppose.

The CHAIR — Very good. Andrew, thank you very much for coming along. In approximately 14 days you will get a draft copy of what Hansard has recorded you as saying. You will be able to make corrections to obvious errors, but other than that it will be as it is. Once again, thank you very much for taking time out of your igloo to come and visit us here today.

Mr PATOCS — No worries. Thanks very much.

Witness withdrew.