

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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Mrs B. Seaton, finance and administration manager, High Country Tree Services.

The CHAIR — Welcome, Briana, to the Parliament of Victoria Rural and Regional Committee inquiry into 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 afforded such privilege. Briana, for the benefit of Hansard, could you give your name and business address, please?

Mrs SEATON — Yes. I am Briana Seaton. You can call me Bri if you like. I am from High Country Tree Services. We are at Lot 3 Crosbys Lane, Mansfield. We also have Mansfield testing and tagging as well, at the same address.

The CHAIR — And Bri, would you like questions as you go through your presentation or at the end of your presentation?

Mrs SEATON — As we go is fine.

The CHAIR — Would you like to lead off with some introductory comments?

Mrs SEATON — Sure. Basically High Country Tree Services is a business that my husband and I have been running since January 2010. We bought it from a business owner who started it up 10 years prior. He retired and we took over, so I guess there was a bit of changing of the guard with younger people coming in. We have 19 guys working for us. We prune and remove vegetation across all terrains. We work for contractors to remove vegetation around power lines, around roads, for government bodies and the like. We do everything from pruning and removing to stump grinding, vegetation chipping, spraying, ground thinning, to reporting assessments. We have qualified arborists, so they are able to do the reporting and assessments for insurance companies and the like.

We have over 40 vehicles and pieces of equipment that we run, so it is a fairly big company within this area. Safety is paramount for our business. It is a high-risk industry, so we obviously want to look after our staff so they can get home to their families every night. So with that in mind, everyone is highly trained and qualified. They do refresher training every 12 months and they use equipment such as climbing gear, cherry pickers, excavators and ropes. We have even had to use helicopters to come in just to ensure their safety, so the business we are running is quite extensive.

Our customer range is substantial — electric companies, road companies, government organisations, alpine resorts, schools, caravan parks, lifestyle properties, owners, farmers and suburban gardeners. So it is from quite large to quite small. So e-business is really vital in our industry. Our guys use iPads every single day on the job site, particularly the works we do for the electrical company. They have a website set up. Basically — sorry to have to go through a bit of this — a job is from power pole to power pole, so it is any vegetation in amongst that. What the company has done is actually plot where every single tree is and which tree they need to remove or prune and to what extent, so it is paramount that this equipment works for us.

The guys work in about a 2-hour radius from Mansfield, so that obviously covers quite a large rural area and there are some very substantial remote areas there. A lot of time is wasted getting to job sites, trying to locate them because the iPad is dropping out, so not being able to connect that way, and also when they get there by not knowing which trees to cut. So that is quite substantial for us, and that is 50 per cent of our work — clearing the vegetation around the power lines. Also our guys obviously carry mobile phones with them. They need to be able to contact management in case there are problems on the job site with equipment that needs to be swapped over, or they need to speak to a client and that sort of thing, and again phones dropping out all the time is continually frustrating and time wasting.

We have actually purchased expensive satellite phones for when the guys are in those remote areas where they have no coverage whatsoever and they have to drive significant distances to get to phone coverage. Woods Point is a really good example of that. We cover all the area out there, so for OHS we have to have some way of the guys being able to contact us in case of emergencies. We have had to purchase satellite phones. At the same time we are testing out some different ear pieces for the guys to use while they are travelling so they can talk to us, because telephone lines drop out all the time.

We are having a lot of difficulty in not being able to communicate, and I find it really poor customer service. Whilst Al, my husband, is out quoting, his phone often drops out — even his emails. He will say to people, ‘I

cannot get you, can you email me, and hopefully we will be able to touch base by email when I get to the next job site', and then his email drops out as well. It is very frustrating. We are not able to be an efficient running business, keeping up with the times. We do the absolute best we can, but there is definitely room for improvement.

We have a lot of trouble contacting clients that have lifestyle properties up here, particularly Melbourne-based clients. An example is a lady who had a phone with Orange up here. I probably do not need to say too much more, but we went to quote for her. She was an hour and a half away and we went to quote the job. We could not locate her address and we could not contact her. Our phone was working but hers was not, so there is the reverse situation of not being able to communicate with the customer. Most of it is time wasting for us. We are going around in circles when we should be able to get the job done a lot quicker and more efficiently.

We have toolbox meetings once a month; one of our contractors comes up from Melbourne. We tried to Skype these toolbox meetings. Our biggest area is actually our workshop shed area, so to get all the crew in to have a Skype meeting in the workshop seemed like a great idea instead of this guy coming up once a month, and he could show us different video footage as well. But that did not work because it kept continually dropping out or slowing down and blurring. We could get the guys outside with Skype, which worked, but then we could not hear anything except the traffic noise. Obviously that will not work during winter as well.

I am a mum, so I have now put MYOB, our accounting program, online so I can access it from home. We have considered, bringing our other office staff back from maternity leave, the option of possibly running it from home for a couple of weeks or even a day a week to be able to give them some flexibility options, but again it drops out continuously as well with the internet connection. Trying to juggle the family and run a business is just very frustrating.

Mr DRUM — So Bri, is Mansfield home?

Mrs SEATON — Mansfield is home. We are just out of Mansfield on 10 acres.

Mr DRUM — And you still have trouble with your internet there dropping out?

Mrs SEATON — Yes. I actually have the IT guy out there now, trying to help sort it out. We spend well over a thousand dollars on internet and phones every month with home and business.

Mr DRUM — A thousand dollars?

Mrs SEATON — Yes. That is home and business — mobiles and everything. I guess basically these points demonstrate that there is quite a social and economic impact on our business, and it is just time wasting and frustrating for us not to be able to get on with the job. We want to be able to grow our business and move forward, and when we are unable to carry out some basic business practices such as making and taking phone calls and receiving emails, it really impacts on our business. The potential benefits are obviously better communication, safer work practices for ourselves and our staff, and efficient business processes being put in place.

Having better e-business would also allow us greater flexibility in the business. As I said before, as a mother, it means I can actually work more from home. I have got limited windows of opportunity when my daughter, Lara, goes to sleep. I need to be able to work in those times, when I have got a bit of quiet. If the internet drops out, by the time I unplug the modem and reconnect and all the works and often sit on the phone to Telstra for a while it is extremely frustrating.

Also we want to keep up with metropolitan businesses. We do a lot of conferences and we are in line with these businesses, and it is interesting talking to Melbourne-based businesses about where they are going. It seems crazy to me that we cannot move along with them because of these limitations. I guess basically we just want to increase our productivity and efficiency and be able to grow and thrive as a business and keep in line with Melbourne.

The CHAIR — Right. You have identified that in your particular circumstances it is the ability to actually access the internet and there are some issues there. If the internet was there, what could the state government do to assist your business and other businesses in the uptake?

Mrs SEATON — If the internet was there and the speed was there?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mrs SEATON — I think education and training would be really vital for our business.

The CHAIR — That would be training for your employees and — —

Mrs SEATON — Both, yes. Absolutely.

The CHAIR — We have had previous speakers today talk about hubs in small towns, or medium towns like this one, and say that they get some interaction and some mentoring and that sort of cross-pollination. What is your view on those facilities?

Mrs SEATON — I think they would be fantastic. I guess because it is not something that is going to work right at the moment here. I think it would be fantastic, absolutely, to be able to learn from various organisations and be able to, as you said, cross-pollinate with different ideas.

Mr DRUM — Bri, have you ever sat down with your husband and tried to put a dollar sum on what it actually costs you in lost productivity, wasted time, sending a crew out to do a job and they cannot find the address? Have you ever sat down and tried to quantify what the lack of connection, whether it be via mobile phone or via internet, actually costs you on a monthly basis?

Mrs SEATON — No, we have not actually sat down, but it comes up in conversation quite a significant amount of the time I guess. We have not quantified it as such, but it certainly would be up there. It would be an interesting study to look into it. We could do that, without a doubt.

Mr DRUM — You are one business in one sector. Does the conversation with other businesses down the pub on a Friday night quite quickly come down to, ‘Well, I’ve got a better story than yours’?

Mrs SEATON — Yes. It is certainly a very common thing to be speaking about — not so much for Mansfield businesses, more the outlying communities, which we deal with quite a bit, because we deal with contractors and the like. They are based that little bit further out of the Mansfield township. But it is definitely something that comes up quite a bit. As I said, we have got communications and contractors down in Melbourne, so they are frustrated with us not being able to communicate with them as effectively as they believe we should be able to. It is certainly a hot topic.

Mr HOWARD — In terms of training, Bri, how have you developed the skills you have needed to develop to get into the various IT components of your industry over the years?

Mrs SEATON — Basically we have done courses at MACE. I have sent the girls off to various things at Shepparton such as workshops. We have been involved in the council-run Small Business Victoria workshops as well, and also the guys who are out in the field have had in-house training sessions with us, my husband and I, to facilitate their use of the iPads. Some has been actual professional training, but, as I said, we have got 19 staff, so it is quite significant for us, being a small to medium business, to be able to finance that. If there was some funding or some subsidies of some description to get some professional training for the guys, I think that would probably help our business as well.

Mr DRUM — Is the arborist field one of those that keeps evolving? I wouldn’t know. Is it the type of industry or sector where you need to keep abreast of the latest trends?

Mrs SEATON — Absolutely. There certainly are some businesses that are still keeping some old-school ways, I guess you could say. We are not one of those. As I said, we continually train our guys and do refresher training every year. We also have lots of different equipment — ropes and the cherry pickers and things like that. Whereas it used to all be climbing, now safety practices are coming into place. With that we also have all the electrical company paperwork, which used to be literally a snail trail. Every job had an A4 sheet, which the guys would have to sign off. Now it has all been updated and is on the iPad, so that certainly has evolved. In terms of quoting, we can do some quotes and basically email them through to the girls in the office and they can send them out straight away, type them up properly or do some modifications to them and send them out. There are a lot of people who are still paper-based, but we are trying to steer away from that and get everything online.

Mr DRUM — This lack of connectivity would also be hindering your ability to go electronic. Is that the case as well?

Mrs SEATON — Yes. Absolutely. We try to do it, but it is not 100 per cent because we cannot rely on it.

Mr DRUM — Do you GPS-track your vehicles and equipment as well?

Mrs SEATON — We do not at the moment, but we have been talking about that. We can track the vehicles on the electrical company's website because they are logged in with that iPad, but if the iPad gets left on the job, then — — ! At the moment the actual vehicle itself or the chipper or whatever is not actually GPS-tracked.

Mr DRUM — Obviously the employees that leave their iPads on site are not paying for them?

Mrs SEATON — No. We had one turn up in Melbourne and we thought, 'That's interesting. Who's taken its Melbourne?'.
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Mr DRUM — Yes.

The CHAIR — You spoke about training being important. Do you have trouble attracting people with the right skills into your business?

Mrs SEATON — Yes.

The CHAIR — Is it holding your business back, because you cannot get enough skilled people?

Mrs SEATON — I think at the moment probably not so much because we are training them. There are two ways of looking at it. You get someone in who is skilled and fantastic and can obviously produce a product quicker, but we try to emphasise youth in this area as well and bringing people from this area up. We have had three school-based apprentices this year working with us, and we have people coming and doing work experience so they can get a feel of whether the industry is what they are after. I think the guys actually quite like the clean slate, the young person that they can train up from scratch and be able to get them to move through. Although they are not as quick and efficient as somebody who is already skilled, they know our way of doing it rather than having to retrain in some steps as well. Certainly we would like a couple more highly-skilled guys, but at the moment we are quite happy with where we are at.

Mr DRUM — Bri, what sort of radius did you say that you worked within?

Mrs SEATON — It is about a 2-hour drive, which is a bit vague.

Mr DRUM — Are your employees all locally based?

Mrs SEATON — Yes. They all drive to our depot in town, or just out of Mansfield, and then pick up a work vehicle — they all work in pairs — and use our work vehicle to the job site and back.

Mr DRUM — Do many of your staff stay on site if they are covering — —

Mrs SEATON — Yes, they do. If they are working in the same area for a week or so, we will get them to stay on site and pay them accommodation and the extra expenses they require.

Mr DRUM — Yes. Again, there is an even greater need to be able to contact them I suppose, if they are out in an isolated area?

Mrs SEATON — Yes.

Mr HOWARD — Can I ask, Bri, as somebody who grew up in bayside Melbourne, what was it that brought you to settle in Mansfield?

Mrs SEATON — My husband!

Mr HOWARD — That is often the case.

The CHAIR — Fair enough.

Mr HOWARD — Yes. That is right.

Mrs SEATON — I actually had horses which were based in Keysborough, and I was always a very outdoorsy-type person, so I wanted to live in an area that was countrified and to have my horses on my property, which I am very fortunate to have. I absolutely love Mansfield; I would not swap it for the world. We continuously have friends coming up each weekend to stay with us because they just love the place. They get frustrated with not being able to have communications all the time, but that is a separate issue.

Mr HOWARD — You just have to tell them it is part of a healthy experience.

Mrs SEATON — That's it. You can put your phone away for the weekend — just read the paper.

Mr DRUM — Are we aware of the extent of what it is going to take to actually fix this issue? Is it one, or two or three phone towers? Is it the NBN? The introduction of the NBN, even if it is via wireless, is that going to give you the connectivity, bandwidth and speeds that you need via internet? Are you thinking that two or three telephone towers will probably fix it up? And the NBN? Are you thinking along those lines?

Mrs SEATON — To be perfectly honest, I am really unsure as to what it would take. If that was all it took, that would be fabulous.

Mr DRUM — But you do not know.

Mrs SEATON — I do not know, sorry.

The CHAIR — Bri, do you have any concluding remarks you would like to make?

Mrs SEATON — No, thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for taking time out of your very busy schedule. In about 14 days you will receive a copy of what Hansard recorded. 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 coming along here today and taking time out of your very busy schedule.

Mrs SEATON — Thank you, lovely to meet you all.

Witness withdrew.