

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

Melbourne — 16 September 2013

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Ms E. Dawson, executive director, Institute for a Broadband-Enabled Society.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Welcome to this hearing of the parliamentary Rural and Regional Committee where we are looking at the issues of using e-business and telecommuting, especially in regional Victoria. We are looking forward to hearing your input to the inquiry. As you are aware, our discussion is being recorded by Hansard and is covered by parliamentary privilege. Anything you say is taken in that vein. We are pleased to hear from you as the representative of the Institute for a Broadband-Enabled Society. We will hand over to you for you to make some general comments. As we go along, if you are happy for us to do so, we will ask some questions and enter into further discussion. Can you start by providing your name and a contact address?

Ms DAWSON — Certainly. My name is Emma Dawson. I am the executive director of the Institute for a Broadband-Enabled Society at the University of Melbourne, Parkville campus, here in Melbourne, and I am very pleased to be here today. Thank you for the invitation to make a contribution to this important consideration. I also acknowledge the words that Tim said at the end of his presentation about the work that we are doing at Melbourne University. Our interest in telework is longstanding. We hosted the inaugural national telework congress last year with, as Tim noted, some very interesting initial research into the benefits of telework for both the employee and the employer.

Mr DRUM — Did people go to that conference or did they stay at home?

Ms DAWSON — We had a good mix, actually. We had about 300 people come along, but we had a lot of people come in via technology, including the then Prime Minister, which fortunately worked. It is always a bit heart in the mouth when we are relying on technology, even worse for an event like that. We are also engaged, as Tim noted, in further research in that space in partnership with the Auckland University of Technology, and that report will be out later this year. We will be launching another research project very shortly. It has yet to be formally announced, but that will be particularly in the space of telework and the benefits for people with a disability.

IBES has a range of ways in which it supports research both at the university and in the broader community, and the fundamental process within the university is through what we call seed funding grants where we provide funding for the initial phases of research. One of our focuses in that process this year is on regional and rural development, and we are hoping to do quite a lot of work on the benefits of telework, particularly for regional and rural Australia. It is a particular interest of mine, not only because I grew up in Gippsland but also because I have worked in that field and so this is a particularly interesting inquiry. I commend the government on taking an interest in this issue.

The interesting thing for us when it comes to regional and rural enterprises obviously is to do with small and medium enterprises. Thirty-five per cent of small and medium enterprises in Australia, as you would know, are located in rural and regional areas, and they are the main suppliers of products and services for almost two-thirds of businesses in Australia.

We have done research, separate research quite apart from our telework research, which has fed into our overall findings in the submission we made to this committee that found that small and medium enterprise owners in regional and rural areas often feel isolated and do not have the technological skills required to exploit online tools and to exploit the facilities afforded by social media and other online media but also the technological skills and understanding and IT support required to drive the intelligent take-up in telework that we would like to see. Telework nationwide stands at about the 17 to 20 per cent mark at the moment, but that is much less in regional areas.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Is that based on at least one day a week?

Ms DAWSON — That is based on at least one day a week, yes — people who are doing what we call hybrid telework. They are working in an office part of the time, and that tends to be the overwhelming majority of people. There was also a recent study done by Marcus Bowles that confirmed that rural Australian small and medium enterprise owners lack the technological skills to fully capitalise on the NBN. One of the things that we urge is that the role of governments and non-profit organisations, chambers of commerce and industry and other organisations in regional and rural Australia really can be about providing skills training and providing the networks that are necessary to enable people to feel that level of comfort and that level of knowledge that is required.

There are a range of benefits from telework throughout the economy and throughout our society, but those specific to regional and rural Australia, we believe, include the ability to create greater inclusion in the workforce. There

tends to be an overrepresentation of people from a low socioeconomic background, Indigenous Australians, people with a disability or others living in regional and rural centres. Telework has been shown to have great inclusion and participation benefits for people from such backgrounds, so the provision of that facility in regional and rural Australia can lead to improvements in inclusion and participation. It also allows businesses, through a mix of telework and what is now being actually more referred to as ‘anywhere work’ rather than ‘working from home’, to take advantage of the lower infrastructure and overhead costs in setting up in regional areas, keeping people close to home, as Tim alluded to earlier, so they are not commuting to the CBD. This has great flow-on effects for the economy, but it can also lead to the development of new markets and of the exploitation of new services within areas that otherwise perhaps had lower economic activity on the ground.

There are several recommendations that we made to the committee in our submission. I think the key findings from our research are an investment in adequate ICT support in the knowledge and skill base amongst management and HR and training, and an investment in and commitment to providing infrastructure. As you have noted yourselves, that is not always just about fibre broadband, although Tim was quite right when he said that the capacity of fibre to enable wi-fi contributes greatly to taking the pressure off mobile systems while ensuring that mobile phone coverage is increased in regional and rural Australia.

I heard Tim also allude to telework hubs. Certainly I would agree with him in pointing you to the RDA Central Coast committee development in that area, in that in regional and rural markets in particular early evidence from setting up telework hubs is showing it to be very beneficial and contributing to economic growth and business activity. People tend to say, ‘I don’t want to go from Geelong to the city, but I will go into town to a telework hub, meet with other people and feel like I am part of that community — but I am still contributing to a business that may be headquartered in Melbourne’.

Certainly there is a role for government and local government organisations in partnership to work together to promote those hubs. We would also urge that there be educational programs and opportunities, whether that be through short course training or online training that could be facilitated or supported by the government for the managers and HR professionals to help them understand the benefits and the unique requirements of managing a telework workforce.

Mr DRUM — I agree with that aspect. I think many managers probably do not have the confidence to take that leap of faith — ‘I’m not sure I’m going to be able to control my worker if she goes, and if she works there then all of a sudden this one here will want to go home and work’.

Ms DAWSON — You are absolutely right.

Mr DRUM — Do you have research or data, or is it just anecdotal?

Ms DAWSON — We have. The report that is coming out shortly has been quite focused on that issue.

Mr DRUM — Is that the October one?

Ms DAWSON — Yes. We have looked and found that a lot of the barriers to the uptake of the teleworker is exactly that, that management traditionally feels very unsure. There is a lack of trust and an uncertainty about, ‘I have my own KPIs I have to report against and my own measurements that I need to keep in place to ensure that my workforce is meeting targets. How do I do that when I can’t see them every day? How do I know that Betty isn’t sitting at home in her pyjamas hitting a refresh button every now and then to make sure it looks like she is still online but she is really watching whatever the latest soap opera is?’.

Mr KATOS — I suppose the irony there is that that manager’s boss is probably four floors above him or in another building or even in another city.

Ms DAWSON — Precisely, and usually entirely unaware of what he is doing at his desk anyway. Tim explained this very well. The online tools available now actually increase oversight of your workforce, whether they are physically co-located in the same building or are in another city, so the ability to see all my work is online. They are engaged, they are responding to my emails and they are picking up the phone. I can see from those tools that exist through many instant messaging services that they are not only present at work today but are engaged.

There is the ability to share a desktop, as Tim referred to, so you can actually work collaboratively with other people, much more easily and, evidence has shown, more productively than you would if you were in a meeting where you talk about an idea and then both go back to your desks and do things separately and come together. So it is enabling and is really not expecting managers to abandon 30 years of experience but is bringing the knowledge to them — as much training and as much education as is required for management, and saying, ‘These are the tools we can give you to help you manage your workforce’.

It also needs to be recognised that telework needs to be enabled as and where appropriate. Not all roles are suitable for telework, obviously. As Tim said, most knowledge workers can perform effectively through telework. But it also depends to some extent on the individual. It tends to be for employees of a certain maturity or certain experience in their role. You would not hire somebody fresh out of college and throw them straight into a telework role; you would probably at this stage expect them to spend some time in the office and have an inauguration into a business before you can — —

Mr KATOS — Even though the role suits telework, it might not suit that individual?

Ms DAWSON — That is right, and management really needs to skill themselves up to recognise that and be able to manage the mix of people. Having said that, the tools that are available now mean that virtually anyone can be taught to telework and encouraged to telework. But certainly the way in which we measure productivity has to be very different than the old idea of presenteeism — that you are at your desk at 8.30 and you are there until 5 o’clock and you have ticked a box. I know that certainly in our office at IBES we have a range of people working different fractions of different times. I work from home one day a week at the moment. You have probably noticed that I am in the late stages of my pregnancy, and it helps me just on the one day a week to not have to battle the traffic. I find that I actually start working earlier that day than I do when I am setting off for work, because my husband still leaves for work at the same time of day and I am ready and I tend to sit down and log on, when I would otherwise still be parking the car.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — On that score, why just one day and not two, three or four days?

Ms DAWSON — Precisely. For me personally I manage staff. I have staff in the office, including at a research lab facility we have at Melbourne Uni that needs attending to, so I tend to go in. I have staff who come in on different days and do not come in other days, so I tend to be in there four days a week. But I am looking at teleworking more next year when I return from maternity leave. The flexibility there is entirely possible in a job like mine. A lot of my work is to do with collaborating with researchers, holding meetings and discussions about research, and often that can more easily be done — you save the time of walking across campus — by logging onto the WebEx tool and sharing a visual presence over the internet. It is certainly something that we try to lead by example with at Melbourne Uni.

Mr DRUM — Emma, I would have thought that this capability of being able to re-engage young mums, or new mums — whatever the correct term is — in those initial months and years after having babies is a great opportunity.

Ms DAWSON — It is. We have not done any research specifically focused on young mothers, although I think it is an area we may look at in the future. This is my first child, but my sister has three young children and she has been teleworking since she went back after her second. She works a total of 20 hours a week and spends 8 of those in the office. She is able to work quite effectively in her business. She is in product development for an apparel company. It certainly does mean that, while with young children sometimes you may not be as available as you would like to be at home, there is the ability to say, ‘The baby’s down, so I’m going to do 2 hours work’, or, ‘I’ve taken my child to kinder. She’s away for 4 hours. I can come home and I’ve got a 3-hour stretch where I can put in some work and then go and pick her up again’. You are not having to battle the commute, as child-care facilities are usually close to home; your office may not be.

These are fantastic facilities for people like young mothers, people with a disability that makes it difficult to travel or people who are caring for people with a disability. It is a really terrific way for getting carers back into the workforce. Their caring duties may be in the morning and in the evening, when they would otherwise have to commute, but in the middle of the day they may have time to devote to a job they can do on a telework basis.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — In the case, for example, of your sister, we have found in talking with some other mums who are teleworking that their employers have a clear set of guidelines. They say, ‘You can’t actually be using your hours for us if your child is not supervised’. Is that the same sort of thing?

Ms DAWSON — Yes, absolutely. In my sister’s case — and I am discussing this with my parents — my parents are in their early 70s now; they love to help out with grandchildren, but being a full-time carer for a child is quite onerous. We hear a lot of this about grandparents. What I will probably do with my mum — and this tends to happen — is I will have a day where I telework, so she can come down for a few hours rather than having to battle traffic and get there in time for me to go to work. She can arrive at 9.30 or 10 o’clock. She is in the house with me. I am able to telework, she has primary care of that child but I am still on hand if there is an emergency; I am not 40 minutes away in traffic and that kind of thing. It really does enable that kind of situation to work very well for families.

Mr DRUM — Plus mum can vacuum, she can put a load of washing on and she can make your coffee.

Ms DAWSON — And make dinner, which is the really important part. There is nothing like mum’s cooking when you are tired.

Mr DRUM — Well done; you have got it all sussed.

Ms DAWSON — Yes, I know; we are working it out. These do tend to be the benefits of telework. While it is clearly of benefit — and our initial report about telework and wellbeing showed that it is of benefit for the general workforce — what we will look at next, particularly in the telework and disability project, I hope, will be the real opportunities afforded by that for people who would otherwise be excluded from the workforce. I know that Peter is here from Infoxchange. He knows a lot more about that, so he will be able to tell you more about that.

Mr DRUM — Fantastic. We will be very keen to see your report when it comes out in October, because it seems to be exactly where we are angling.

Ms DAWSON — To finish, I will repeat the comments that Tim made about the technology mix that is necessary. Obviously we are the Institute for a Broadband-Enabled Society and a lot of people, given the recent debate at the federal level, tend to think of broadband as only being about fibre and only to the home. It is obviously not. The NBN, even as it was under the previous Labor government, was always about a mix of technologies, and that included, particularly in rural and regional Australia, a mix of satellite and wireless. The understanding is that broadband-delivered wi-fi services can take that heat off the mobile network, at the same time the ACMA has released quite a lot of new spectrum for 4G mobile services, which will come online next year after the shutdown of the final analogue television services — that will actually massively boost mobile coverage, partnered with the ability to increasingly use wi-fi in home. When you get home with your smartphone, it actually shuts off the 3G network and gets onto your home wi-fi. That relieves the congestion.

The mix of technologies and the different technologies that are available enable connectivity in home or in the business place and throughout regional and rural Australia in particular. As you noted, the mobile coverage in parts of rural Australia has been very poor and poorly understood by people in the capital cities. That will actually open up teleworking to a whole range of new businesses — that is, ones that at the moment say, ‘I would love to do it, but I need massive files downloaded and it takes too much time’. Within the next two to four years we will see a massive improvement in that as well.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — All right, Emma. Thank you for that. As Damian said, we will be interested in looking at your report when it becomes available.

Ms DAWSON — We will make sure you get a copy.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Our staff might want to follow up with you on some of those issues at the time. As you are aware, Hansard has been recording our discussion, and a copy of the Hansard transcript will be sent out to you within the next couple of weeks for you to just look over and see that you are satisfied that it reflects what you believe you said. Then it will come back to us to be formally accepted as part of our hearings. Thank you again for coming in today, Emma.

Witness withdrew.