

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

Horsham — 31 July 2013

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Ms N. Funcke, teleworker, American Express.

The CHAIR — Welcome, Narelle, to the Rural and Regional Committee of the Parliament of Victoria and its 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 the relevant Australian law. I also advise that any comments made outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. Narelle, for the benefit of Hansard, could you please give your name and address?

Ms FUNCKE — Narelle Funcke, 163 R Funckes Road, Minyip, 3392.

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

Ms FUNCKE — Yes, as we go is fine. No worries.

The CHAIR — All right. Would you like to lead off? Just tell us a bit about yourself and what you do for work.

Ms FUNCKE — I work for American Express with its business travel team, and I have done so for 10 or 11 years now. I am not in a customer-facing role. I am in what we term service delivery. So it is the back end — looking after platform support, project management, process re-engineering and all of those types of jobs that are related to how American Express business travel processes our corporate clients' travel bookings. I do not deal directly with our clients themselves, so my customers are really our internal department. They would come to us if we needed to deploy a new technology or wanted to review a process to see if we could streamline it and things like that, both for American Express ourselves for an internal process, or for an external process that was done specifically for a client. So I have had a couple of roles within that team — some pure project management roles. It is a regional team, so it covers Japan, the Asia-Pacific and Australia. As I said, that is looking at internal processes in Amex offices in all of those countries that are covered by that.

The CHAIR — So you are doing all of that from Minyip?

Ms FUNCKE — I am. One of the reasons I suppose I can be a remote worker is that I do not have to have a face-to-face relationship necessarily with our customers, so it does not matter where I sit in the world. If I am doing something in India, I am unlikely to meet those people face to face anyway so you can conduct the same conference calls, live meetings and whatever other collaborative tools you want to use sitting on a farm in Minyip verses sitting in our head office in Collins Street, or for that matter sitting in our office in Gurgaon in India.

Mr HOWARD — So how does your contract with American Express work so that they are satisfied that you are completing set tasks or that they are getting their value for money out of you?

Ms FUNCKE — Amex has what we call the performance management process. No matter whether you work from home or in an office, you go through that every year. At the beginning of the year, everyone sets or has set for them, cascaded from further up in the business, a set of goals that have to be met and a set of what we term leadership competencies that relate to communications, team building, thinking outside the box — that whole type of thing. Then you complete a half-yearly and an end-of-year assessment. Internally that is rated by your leaders, and then that scales up across the region and across the globe. You have to reach certain standards within that process to be entitled to work from home. Once you have done that their assumption is you are working to the best of your ability without supervision.

Mr TREZISE — Narelle, given you are working internationally, how is your work week structured?

Ms FUNCKE — At the moment I have only been 12 months back from maternity leave, so right now I am actually just part time. So I have 21 hours. For all intents and purposes, it is Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. There is a fair degree of flexibility in that because I am in a regional role. People who are only in an Australian role would probably stick quite closely to that. In a regional role or a global role, as we also have, that can vary. Like every job, you tend to work more hours than what you are actually listed for, but my first conference call this morning was at 7, so I did that from home, and then I packed myself up and came in here because I had to drop my daughter off at day care, and I have done the rest of the day from in here, and I will probably go home — —

Mr HOWARD — When you say ‘in here’, is that in this building?

Ms FUNCKE — Yes, I work in here two days a week: Monday and Wednesday.

Mr HOWARD — Is that a shared office facility?

Ms FUNCKE — No, I just rent the meeting room that the guys have here. The Wimmera Business Centre has a much smaller meeting room than this. So I just basically book that space — I have booked that space on a permanent basis on Mondays and Wednesdays.

Mr TREZISE — Do you do that out of necessity because your child goes to child care here?

Ms FUNCKE — Yes, correct.

Mr TREZISE — Or are you coming in here for the social aspects of working here?

Ms FUNCKE — No. One of the requirements in Amex’s work-from-home arrangements is that you are not allowed to be the primary carer of a child during business hours. Our daughter is three, so she goes to day care. The only day care is in Horsham. It is a 70-kilometre drive for me, so I cannot make that across in the morning and back home in the afternoon — 280 kilometres a day is just not feasible. I was lucky enough to find the space here, so I come in the morning, drop her off and stay the day here. So on a Tuesday, my husband takes her, and I just work from home. So if I had day care in Minyip, for example, I would not come to Horsham at all to work. I would do it from home.

Mr HOWARD — So in the office space that you work from here, all you require is some connectivity so you can bring your laptop along, or what?

Ms FUNCKE — Yes, all I need is power, and I have a wireless internet modem. The only other thing I have to have, and the guys here very kindly installed it for me, is a phone that can be dialled directly from outside and does not go through their switchboard. That is because the phone technology that we use at Amex is a soft phone, so I dial out through my computer. There is never any outbound call made from Wimmera Business Centre’s phone. It is all inbound calls. As long as I have a phone that can be dialled directly without coming through their switch, that is all I need. So I can set that up at home. I can direct that to my mobile. Any number — it does not matter.

Mr HOWARD — So the reason you are back in Minyip is that your husband is — —

Ms FUNCKE — A farmer.

Mr HOWARD — He is a farmer in Minyip.

Ms FUNCKE — We are about 17 kilometres out of Minyip itself on a farm. As I said, it does not matter where I sit. So the reason that I suppose I am out here is because that is where our family is.

Mr TREZISE — You may have mentioned this — did you work for American Express in the first place, or how did you come into this?

Ms FUNCKE — I worked for Amex already, before I met my husband, and I did it from Melbourne. I lived in Melbourne originally. I started off by going into the office like a normal person, 9 to 5, five days a week, and then when I met my husband and made the move up here, I could bring my job with me and just sit at the farm. It did cause some difficulties to start with because of the lack of internet connectivity. When we first came here we had dial-up, and that was all that was available and that was only eight years ago.

So when I first came I actually could not work from the farm. I had to drive into Minyip itself, and I booked a little space in there. In one of the buildings there was a little room available, because within Minyip township itself they had ADSL. So as long as I was in town I could connect to the ADSL network. Then we got some wireless connectivity. We originally only had Telstra, and that necessitated — and it still does — us having an external aerial. It is still not great coverage, but it is enough to let me do 90 per cent of what I need to do from home. It limits some things that can be done. Videoconferencing I cannot manage, because there is just not the bandwidth to be able to do that.

Because Amex has so many people working from home, most of our technology support is done remotely. So some of that support from our tech team — where they may need to download something remotely — cannot happen because, again, the connection is not strong enough to allow that. But from a day-to-day perspective, it is enough to let me access. We use a VPN, so we have to access through the VPN, which takes up a fair bit of bandwidth on its own, and then once I am in there we can access the emails and the collaborative tools. Our Live Meeting that we use, which is an outlet tool for sharing desktops, is very slow but it works. I would not want to do a client presentation, but if I have to do that then I go to Melbourne and do it on our network directly.

The CHAIR — So how often do you go to Melbourne?

Ms FUNCKE — It depends on the project I am working on. Most of the team I work with are in Sydney, so I have probably been to Sydney three times and once to Melbourne this year, but that is because the project has required that much contact time with vendors and things like that. If I do not need to make that contact, I do not go at all.

The CHAIR — And you said before that you come in here two days a week and you used to utilise the building at Minyip?

Ms FUNCKE — Yes.

The CHAIR — When we have been out talking to people, they have talked about hubs. I suppose they are de facto hubs, are they? You are here hiring a meeting room, and in Minyip you were hiring a space?

Ms FUNCKE — Yes, and that is a separate arrangement that I make personally because the facilities that I need do not exist where I live. If they existed where I lived, I would not be doing any of that at all; I would just work from home. I did that before we had our daughter. I worked full time, five days a week, from our home office on the farm. The only reason I come here is that it is the nearest day care. So if Minyip had day care we would not be making this trip at all.

Mr TREZISE — Did you ever think you would be living in Minyip?

Ms FUNCKE — I did come from a small country town. I was raised in Riddells Creek, which is not this far away but was still quite a distance, back when I last lived there. So the size of the town is okay. I moved to Melbourne to get work, back when I was 20, and probably did not think I would go back out again — but, yes, technology allows you to do it.

The CHAIR — You have also touched on this, but you said you have to achieve a certain level within Amex before they allow you to do it. How do they measure it? We hear from others that other employers are not confident that the employees will be putting out enough time. So how do they measure your output?

Ms FUNCKE — Really it comes down to getting the job done, and, to be honest, my immediate leader says, 'I don't care what days you work and what you do, as long as the task is achieved'. So if one week that means I work Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday and another week it means I work five half days, they are not fussed. But that arrangement only comes about because I have been doing the same level of output for 10 years for them. They may not be that flexible for someone who has just recently moved into a home work environment.

So it comes down to the output. If they are talking about just one of their corporate travel consultants, they have very specific goals. They have to issue a certain number of tickets per day and complete a certain number of bookings per day. There are certain very specific tasks that they need to meet, and if they do not meet those when they move to a home environment, then that triggers a management process to get that sorted.

Mr TREZISE — Narelle, given your home environment was also your workplace, did American Express prescribe or dictate what type of workplace you had?

Ms FUNCKE — Yes. We have to meet OHS requirements. Amex would probably have a slight heart attack if they could see where I work.

Mr HOWARD — So they do not send anybody out?

Ms FUNCKE — They do for everyone else because every other home worker they have is in the suburbs, and they provide all of the office equipment. They provide the desk, the chair and the laptop, so the desk has to meet OHS standards, the chairs have to meet requirements and all of that type of thing, and there is a prescribed list that says you have to have ventilation and all of that sort of stuff. And they do check that within the suburbs. Someone comes out and investigates. They do not want you sitting at the kitchen table in the middle of your family and so on. They expect it to be a separate room, with the desks that they are providing, the equipment they are providing and all of that sort of stuff.

Mr TREZISE — They have not quite got out to Minyip yet?

Ms FUNCKE — No. They did deliver the furniture, and when I gave them the address they did go, ‘Oh goodness!’. I said I could just go and buy it myself and send them the bill, but they said, ‘No, we’ll deliver it’.

The CHAIR — It would have been a nice drive for it.

Ms FUNCKE — That is what the guy said. He had a lovely lunch at the pub. So they provide all of that, and there are some expectations around what the working conditions will look like, but I am probably closer to meeting them here than I am at home anyway. But yes, there is paperwork that you can complete and sign off on that says you will not be sitting at your kitchen table with kids running around and that sort of thing.

The CHAIR — So I suppose other than child care in Minyip, what could a government do to assist in encouraging more people to work remotely?

Ms FUNCKE — I think it comes down to just facilities in general, and I was saying this to someone ages ago — there are many jobs that could be done from Minyip. Anybody who does not necessarily have to face a client could do it. But to do the supermarket shopping — the government cannot help with this — it is still a 70 kilometre drive to go to a decent supermarket. Schools and child care are always an issue. Community facilities start to dwindle when there are less people, and fundraising to maintain those facilities becomes quite onerous on half a dozen families.

We have kindergarten gym in Minyip, for example, which is a partnership between Dunmunkle Health Services and the Yarriambiack shire. There are nine kids there at the moment, and we struggle to get funding. We have applied for several grants, for example, to help us with heating and cooling and things like that, and we come up a lot of the time against the issue where people say there are not enough children using that facility and we are saying to them, ‘But if we cannot make the facility good enough, we cannot get the people to use it’. It is almost a build-it-and-they-will-come situation, and I do not know how you manage that. If someone were to build a child-care facility in Minyip, there probably would not be that many kids at it to start with. But if it is there, we might find people saying, ‘Oh look, we can move to Minyip’. But I do not know how that gets managed, because you take the punt that they will not, for whatever reason, come to Minyip.

I think a lot of family facilities start to go by the wayside as some of these towns get smaller. Minyip Primary School only has 38 kids, so how long that will last is another question. The school bus runs start to disappear. For us that would necessitate a 35-kilometre round trip to take Annabel to school. At the moment it still runs out to our place because our neighbours have two school-age children, but they will not be there shortly and the school bus will stop and it will be exceedingly difficult for us to get it to start again for one child 17 kilometres from the school. People give those things consideration when they are looking to move.

A lot of family facilities struggle, as well as things like education. Schools and school bus runs start to close and get consolidated in the largest centres. Rupanyup has 40 kids at its school, and I know they have already had trouble with their bus runs. Even Warracknabeal, which is a heap bigger, has had school bus runs withdrawn from some of its farming communities. Again, people are saying, ‘You are forcing us to move into town in order to be able to take kids to school and fit it in with work schedules and that sort of stuff’. There are a lot of those sorts of considerations that are not necessarily related specifically to the telecommunication facilities that exist or anything like that. I think it is the whole-of-life factor that sometimes starts to disappear.

Mr HOWARD — In a sense you were lucky that you were already working for an employer that knew that you could telework and had the process in place. I guess the issue for us is encouraging more employers to see that there may be an opportunity and they might just need to develop their facilities.

Ms FUNCKE — American Express globally is very supportive of work-from-home arrangements for a number of reasons. For one thing, it saves them money. In round figures they say it costs them \$4000 a year to support me working from home. In terms of me doing the same job from Collins Street, it costs them \$10 000 because they factor in real estate costs and all those sorts of things, so there is a financial benefit for any company to send their workers home.

In the majority of cases you get better work-life balance. You always run over at the edges when you are at home — ‘I’ll just go back into the office after tea and see if I can finish that’ — but that gets traded off quite easily against the fact that you are not travelling to and from work and that sort of stuff. But they do have a very stringent policy on trying to maintain that work-life balance. They feel they get better performance out of their people from home because they are taking away some of those day-to-day travel concerns and all of that sort of stuff.

It widens their employment pool, because if you can do the job from here, then they can recruit from here as well. I happen to live out here, but they could advertise for a corporate travel consultant to sit anywhere they wanted to. You may have the world’s most experienced corporate travel consultant who happens to have married a farmer and had a couple of kids sitting in Horsham. If they were not allowed to work from home, then Amex could not draw on that pool of knowledge. I think if companies are looking at it in that fashion, then they should be supporting it.

Amex has done some unusual things for me in that I am working from outside my actual home, which is not their usual policy, but they are pretty good about that. They have made it work. People who are doing it have got to then be willing to put in the hours and not do all their washing on Tuesday or whatever. But usually, if it is a beneficial arrangement, most people are happy to do their work and still do their washing in the half-hour that they save because they are not travelling from an office to home on public transport.

There is the ‘same old, same old’. Yes, I would love to have better internet connection, which would allow me to do some of the videoconferencing. As not only Amex but all people begin to push for that to save travel costs and all those sorts of things, that will start to become an issue for me, I would suggest, within the next couple of years, but I will cross that bridge when I come to it and see what happens. It is definitely something that I think should be supported by government and employers. They really need to understand the benefits of having people work from home.

The CHAIR — Narelle, do you have any final comments that you would like to make?

Ms FUNCKE — No, not at all. Thanks for the opportunity to tell my story. As I said, it is not that exciting.

Mr HOWARD — It was a good story. It is a real example.

Ms FUNCKE — It has been good. It was good that Jo thought of me when I was sitting in my little hidey-hole around the corner there.

Mr HOWARD — The only other thing I wanted to ask was: in terms of people who telework I sometimes wonder whether they miss the work environment they were in and the social interaction. How do they adjust to that change?

Ms FUNCKE — Personally I am okay with it. American Express is very focused. We have an entire committee dedicated to employee engagement. That is how it is referred to. As I said, we are a regional team, so we have staff in Singapore, India, Hong Kong, Australia and China.

Mr HOWARD — A staff party must be an interesting affair.

Mr TREZISE — All roads lead to Minyip!

Ms FUNCKE — Our employee engagement after dinner two weeks ago was a game of Pictionary. With the collaborative tools we all sat in front of our screens on a conference call. Whilst we cannot always see each other, because not everyone has videoconferencing abilities, you could see what was happening on the screen. We were in teams and we played Pictionary for 2 hours and had a great time. As long as the employer is thinking about those things, the social issues caused by distance can be somewhat overcome — very much so.

That sounds a bit daggy — playing a game of Pictionary on your computer — but it was a bit of a laugh. Cultural differences make it all the more fun.

The CHAIR — Very good, Narelle. Thank you very much for coming along this afternoon and enlightening us on your experiences.

Ms FUNCKE — No worries.

The CHAIR — The information you have given us has been very valuable to our inquiry. In about 14 days you will get a draft copy of the Hansard transcript. You will be able to make corrections to obvious errors, but other than that it will stay as it is. Once again thank you very much.

Ms FUNCKE — No worries. Thanks, everyone.

Witness withdrew.