

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

Newhaven — 10 September 2013

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Ms L. Gaskin, president, Phillip Island Tourism and Business Association, and Turn the Page Bookshop.

The CHAIR — Welcome, Lois, to the Parliament of Victoria'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 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. Lois, for the benefit of Hansard, could you give your name and address?

Ms GASKIN — Yes. My name is Lois Gaskin, and my home address is 14 Currawong Close, Cowes.

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

Ms GASKIN — You could ask me questions, if you like, as I go, or you can just ask me questions, and I will answer them. Would you like me to — —

The CHAIR — You lead off with a few comments then, and we will have a bit of discussion.

Ms GASKIN — Okay. I had a look at the terms of reference. I am actually a business owner in Cowes. I own a bookshop — the business, not the shop itself. I am also the president of the Phillip Island Tourism and Business Association. We talk a lot about online and how things work. I guess from the point of view of our shop, we have a website, so we have a presence, and we have Facebook, but we do not actually sell books online, although we get contacted by people through those connections to look for books. We get asked by customers to buy books online for them.

I think one of the things with rural areas is that there are quite a number of people who do not have computers. I know some people who do not have mobile phones; they have home phones. Even people who have computers — we get asked to actually shop online for people for books. We do a lot of searching for books there. It is not quite a myth, but there is the story that the internet is killing bricks and mortar. We have not found that at all. We have a customer who has a Kobo, and we actually download his books for him. He is an elderly man, and he does not have a computer.

I think working remotely — it is a good thing to have, but you are not reaching the whole market, because there are still a lot of people who are not connected. You do find that once you get connected — we had our website for a while before I even touched Facebook. Then once I started using Facebook — it is just amazing the amount of response you get suddenly. You just realise that it does not take too much work. We are very busy. It is a seven-day-a-week business, so I do not have a lot of time, but once you start working with these tools you actually see how they work and how beneficial they are.

The CHAIR — What can we do to help people take up the use of their phones and computers?

Ms GASKIN — I think there is a lot of fear. I have talked to some of the people who actually do not have a computer, and there is a lot of fear about how it works — will they get invaded? Will people start to get into their information?

Mr TREZISE — I hope they did not watch *Four Corners* last night.

Ms GASKIN — I did not see it; I was out. I will have a look at it. I just think it is hard for them. I have had a discussion with someone in the last week who has set up a website for their association, and they are not sure whether they should use Facebook, because they might get negative comments. It is all about managing how you run your Facebook and how you run your internet. I showed her ours. So far we have not had anything negative on ours, so maybe we are just lucky. They are just really concerned about the responses they might get on Facebook. I think there is still a little bit of a lack of knowledge out there about how you can use them, how they can be beneficial for your business and how you can reach a lot more people. There is still that group of people who are looking at things, but they just find it really difficult.

Mr TREZISE — Lois, explain to me how you have used Facebook to benefit your business.

Ms GASKIN — I post on books that are coming up, new books and events. I have actually started putting on funny stories about customers in bookshops, and they have had a huge response. People are responding positively to things like that — because we have lots of funny stories.

The CHAIR — In a bookshop?

Ms GASKIN — Yes. People come in and ask really ridiculous questions. That seems to elicit a response from heaps of people, and it is all positive. People just do not realise that it reaches all those people. As I said, we do not sell online, but we have someone who manages our website, and he changes it regularly. If I post something on Facebook, he will then transfer some of it to the website, or he will respond to it, and therefore it gets all the messages going. So it is a really active tool. We do not use Twitter; I do not have time. I think a lot more people would if somebody showed them; it is just getting them on.

A little while ago there were some free workshops on the island. We went to one on cloud computing, and it was really interesting. We immediately initiated a couple of small things, and we have a few things to go. It is out there. I do not understand everything, but if you understand it a little bit more, you can use it to the benefit of your business.

Mr TREZISE — So you can see that there is a role for government, even if it is local government, in providing information and community education to the community?

Ms GASKIN — Yes. I guess the problem we have found down here is getting people there. With the people who go, you are speaking to the converted, so it is about reaching those other people. Maybe we can work with the council to try to get more, because I know that the information sessions were really valuable. They were free, they were not too overwhelming and they just gave you some stuff to go away with. I think the issue is actually getting the people there.

The CHAIR — Has your tourism and business association tried to have any programs?

Ms GASKIN — That is who we ran it through. We picked it up. Some of them were pretty successful, but others were not. Only about 8 or 10 people turned up to the one that we went to.

The CHAIR — What happened at the ones that were successful?

Ms GASKIN — As far as people going?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Ms GASKIN — There were about 20 people there, I think.

The CHAIR — Why were there more at that one?

Ms GASKIN — I do not know. We have not actually looked at that, but we can look at that and assess it.

The CHAIR — We like to hear about things that work.

Ms GASKIN — I thought the session we went to worked. It is just that people who said they would go did not turn up. You can only offer people something, and it is for them as to whether they take it up. It is about how to get people there, how to give them the information and how to make it easier for them to move into that space. I am not quite sure how; we try very hard.

One of the things I had a look at was the occupational health and safety issue. I think that one of the things is the isolation of working in an e-business — working at home in an office, with no contact. You can have those tools, but I think having a bricks and mortar shop that people can come into and actually talk to you on a daily basis is the really healthy thing, and I know that people down here really like that. Maybe this has something to do with why they are not taking this up at a bigger rate — because people love to come in and chat. The customers come in, but they are also your friends.

The CHAIR — Can you not chat on Facebook?

Ms GASKIN — Well, you can, but it is not the same. I think it is really important for people to have that personal contact too. That is probably also quite a large part of what is happening.

Mr TREZISE — Phillip Island is a relatively small and accessible community, so it is relatively easy to get to the bookshop.

Ms GASKIN — Absolutely, yes. People will come in and say that they got something online, and that is fine. There is nothing you can do about it. It is there; it is a tool. We use it for things we cannot access down here personally. We use it also, as I said, to find books for customers. They come in and request things, so we use it as a tool then.

Mr TREZISE — Lois, tell me why you have not considered selling books online?

Ms GASKIN — It is a much more complicated website. We may move to it, but at the moment we do not have people necessarily contacting us and asking. They can email us, and they can send a message through Facebook. We have not actually taken that step yet, but it is something we are looking at. We are still getting used to all of that, so we are working our way through it — because I am not very good with that stuff, and I am there most of the time.

I guess we have a very organic organisation, and especially on the island travelling to and from work is not a huge issue. We can actually connect to our bookshop computer from home. That is something we have set up as well. You cannot physically sell books in a shop from home. If your shop is not open, you cannot sell books from home. I see all the benefits, and a lot of the businesses in our association work online a lot. We are also linked with Destination Phillip Island. We have the fantastic Visit Phillip Island website, there is a Friends of Phillip Island Facebook page, there is a booking service that runs through the information centre and people use iPhones and connect to the island. All the members are actually on the website, so they are all connected in some way, but we do have members who do not have email addresses, which is quite extraordinary in this day and age when you are running a business — not even having an email address. How do you move these people?

The CHAIR — We are here to learn how you move them.

Mr TREZISE — Is that a role, though, for government? Is that a role for local government?

Ms GASKIN — I think it could be, yes.

Mr TREZISE — It has taken a role to some degree. You talked about the workshops, which I think were run by the council, so there is that role there.

Ms GASKIN — Yes. It is about physically getting people to buy a computer, go online, understand what they are doing and not be too frightened of it. So there is a role, yes, and probably also for the association. We can help those members move forward with that and move online. Your reach is so much bigger because you are reaching people you would not have reached before, but you still have to manage the customer base that you have. So it is a real balance.

Having spoken to a number of the business owners, I know there is one young lady who owns two shops. She does a lot of Facebook stuff, and she gets huge responses from them.

Mr TREZISE — It is interesting that you said ‘young’. To some degree it can be a generational issue as well, and we can all say that.

Ms GASKIN — I mean she is younger than me. There are people using it for their benefit. She said she gets huge responses, but she has got more likes than me at this stage. It is understanding how that works, who you are reaching, what sorts of things you need to put on to catch your people, to get them in.

The CHAIR — You said earlier that you do not do online sales in your business.

Ms GASKIN — Yes.

The CHAIR — Why not? This is a tourist area; people come into your shop and have a good experience. Then they go back to Melbourne, Sydney or wherever and say, ‘I’ve had a good experience at Phillip Island in the bookshop down there’.

Ms GASKIN — ‘I can buy online’. People ring us up after they have been. It took us probably three years to decide what kind of website we wanted. We knew we had to be on, but you are wanting to present yourself. As I said, I did not use Facebook for a while. We are getting there, and we will move that way, because things just

go that way; you just have to go with it. Now we have worked out some things with cloud and the tools that we can use, I can see us moving into that arena where we sell online.

The CHAIR — Is there anything government can do to assist you and other businesses in town to move there more quickly.

Ms GASKIN — I like to do things one at a time, learn properly how to do it and do it properly. I guess that is still a step further for me and our business — how much time it will take, how do I run it efficiently and how do I protect the brand that we have? It is having someone stand beside me and walk me through the steps.

The CHAIR — You like to take one step, get comfortable and then take another step?

Ms GASKIN — Yes, because I like to do it properly, and I like to know exactly what I am doing. I just do not like to say, ‘I will do that’, and then suddenly decide that I do not know what I am doing.

I do not know about legislative impediments to these things at state, federal or local government level at this stage. I can see a role for the local and probably the state government in helping. I know that I do not know everything; I am not an expert. I would be more likely to go to courses now that we have been to the cloud and I have learnt lots of things. I would be more likely to go and learn more.

The CHAIR — Have there been any unexpected benefits since you have been on Facebook and you have been to the cloud and are using them in your business?

Ms GASKIN — I guess there has been a lot of activity on the Facebook site. A lot more people have come on board. People will come into the shop and comment that they saw something on Facebook, so there is activity out there, yes. I have found that if you put something on on a regular basis, a few times a week, you go to it, you post something and you will get an immediate spike in activity. People are more aware. There are some people there who I know are on the island, and they are responding to those things. They are seeing us on a more regular basis. They are more aware of us, and we are more aware of them.

It is quite a scary world. I do not know much, but I probably know more than some people. It is still kind of a scary thing to get into. I think that is what you will find with a lot of people. But there are benefits, and when we do move forward I get excited that we have gone into another area and started something else. I talk to other businesses about it and try to encourage them to at least step forward. We can do that through the association too.

The CHAIR — All right, Lois. Thanks very much for coming along today and giving up some of your valuable time to give us a few clues.

Ms GASKIN — Thank you very much. That is all right. I hope it was helpful.

The CHAIR — It was very helpful. Very good. In approximately 14 days a draft transcript will be sent to you. You will be able to correct obvious errors, but other than that it will be as it is. Once again, thank you very much for your time, and all the best with your endeavours with the bookshop. Hopefully Facebook does not keep you too busy so you get time to run your business.

Ms GASKIN — It is all right. It is enjoyable too. I look forward to seeing the report and seeing how we can all move forward.

Mr TREZISE — It could become a bestseller.

Ms GASKIN — We could do an event. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.